A Tool for Transformative Family Engagement:

A Commentary on the Family Engagement Playbook

Global Family Research Project

We wish to thank the many people who reviewed previous versions of the Playbook and offered their time and generous feedback.

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In the fall of 2018, the Global Family Research Project released a challenge paper for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The paper took a look back at the history of family engagement, reviewed the research and practice warrant for it, and set an agenda for looking forward to what the next generation of transformative family engagement is and could be. Interestingly, the theme emerging from the paper that has sparked some of the greatest discussion is that of co-creation.

In essence, we have seen a real desire among people, groups, and organizations in the field—perhaps animated by some of the larger societal conversations taking place around equity, inclusion, and diversity —to find meaningful approaches to listening to parents, empowering them, and co-creating with them. We're seeing a real commitment on the part of people and organizations to move away from tropes about achievement gaps that focus on individual student and family deficits to finding ways to adapt systems that enable all students and families to thrive. And we're seeing people, groups, and organizations think meaningfully about the individual skills and competencies and larger systems that are necessary to support change rather than simply relying on adoption of long-established programs and models.

But the question that remains is how best to move from a desire to change to realistically doing it.

To help answer this question, we've created the Family Engagement Playbook. The Family Engagement Playbook is a collection of promising research-based approaches to strengthen individual competencies, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures that build capacity for meaningful co-created family engagement. The Playbook offers ideas, models, and tools that can be easily integrated into any training, continuing education, and organizational learning opportunities in a variety of settings, including higher education, schools, early childhood programs, afterschool programs, and libraries, among others.

What bridges all of the Playbook's approaches is that they move families' ideas and strengths from the periphery to the center, especially the contributions of those who have been historically marginalized and discriminated against in our society. As such, the Playbook is one component of larger efforts to create conditions for equitable family engagement in which all families, regardless of their linguistic, racial, or cultural background, are afforded fair opportunities to play the roles they want and desire in their children's learning and growth.

Explore the Family Engagement Playbook

https://medium.com/familyengagementplaybook

| Change MINDSETS | Build RELATIONSHIPS | Transform ORGANIZATIONS |

Building Capacity for Co-Creation

The idea of co-creation draws from multiple disciplines, including education, design, business, and linguistics to name a few.[1] In the field of family engagement, at its most general level, co-creation refers to the joint production of ideas, interpretations, actions, activities, and policies among families, schools, and communities. It involves asking questions, listening, empowering, sharing perspectives and information, partnering, co-designing, implementing and assessing new methods and solutions, and supporting parent leadership and advocacy for educational equity and change.[2] At its core, co-creation is about a shift in power that can bring about a variety of outcomes, such as increased collaborative decision making, empowered families, stronger parent and educator relationships, and the development of more-effective and equitable family engagement practices, strategies, and programs.[3]

Building capacity for co-creation is a systemwide effort that requires multiple levels of support, namely, individual, relational, and organizational transformations:

- **Shifts in individual mindsets:** Meaningful family engagement necessitates a shift in mindset among individuals who work with and care about families, from doing to and for families to doing *with* them; from being the expert to acknowledging parents as experts; from a one-size-fits-all approach to personalizing family engagement. A critical component of this process is helping teachers and others who serve families to overcome their own implicit biases, to take families' perspectives, and to recognize that stereotypes hurt families. Similarly, building capacity for co-creation also requires growing the confidence of families to engage equitably.

- **Shifts in relationships:** When relationships between educators and families are characterized by mutual respect, trust, open communication, and inclusion in decision making, families are more likely to feel confident about their roles as advocates and become more engaged in their children's learning. Positive relationships between educators and families benefit children's health, social and emotional well-being, and cognitive skills. Yet these relationships are sometimes difficult to form and do not happen overnight, nor do they exist in a vacuum. They are fundamentally shaped by and built upon a community's culture—its beliefs, goals, social norms, practices, everyday routines, languages, and economic resources. Building strong family-school-community relationships means that educators have to take time to understand family strengths and everyday practices and make them the cornerstones of their work. And it means that relationships are based in productive co-constructed activities that are mutually beneficial.

- **Organizational change:** In order for families and educators to share responsibility, it is necessary to change not only individual mindsets and relationships but also organizational supports and approaches (see textbox below). This calls for a shift from random, uncoordinated, and compliance-driven family engagement efforts to processes and practices that bring family perspectives and experiences to the forefront in coherent ways. It means creating open space for families to take leadership and decision-making roles. And it means leaders provide meaningful

supervision and continuing learning opportunities around family engagement topics, create a positive work climate, assign manageable workloads, and place an emphasis on using data for continuous learning and improvement.
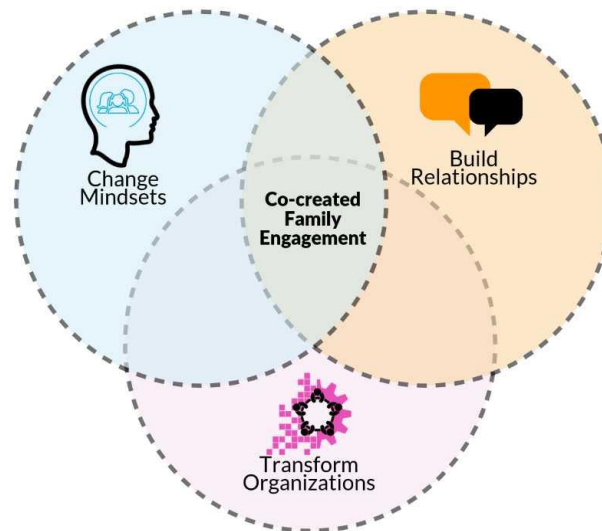
Developing individual competencies as well as creating the conditions for successful practice are inseparable. In evaluating a training program for educators, Thomas R. Guskey (a leading evaluator of professional development) found that while it was well implemented from a training perspective, practice and outcomes did not change. Nothing in the model explained why, but further examination of the programs showed that the educators worked in organizations that did not support the changes that their training showed were necessary. In order to bring in a more ecological perspective, Guskey added a new element in his model for organizational support and change in order to examine the organizational factors influencing implementation of new practices.[4]

Family Engagement Playbook: A Tool for Change

The *Family Engagement Playbook* is a dynamic and living compilation of various approaches that help build the capacity for shifts in mindsets, equitable relationships, and organizational transformation that leads to co-created family engagement. Each approach includes a description of what it is, how it can be used, the outcomes it brings about, and examples of it in action. Table 1 provides the list of the approaches within the Playbook, a short description of each, and potential benefits they bring about.

The approaches in the Playbook are not the universe of those that exist but are a starting point around which we hope to build a conversation and crowdsource new ideas. We also acknowledge that there is overlap among the approaches and many can be used together in various ways. But perhaps that is their greatest strength—that they are flexible and can be integrated into any program or model.

With the methods taken together, the Playbook suggests that:

- ***A variety of approaches exists that can change mindsets, build more equitable family-school-community relationships, and create organizational change that brings about co-created family engagement.*** These approaches often work in tandem and complement one another. For example, Collaborative Teaming is a method that engages a group of people to share information and gain understanding that promotes individual and group capacity to achieve common goals. In the case of Academic Parent Teacher Teams, teachers and families have a continuous conversation over the course of the school year around student goals and performance data. The results of this work are that school leaders develop a better understanding of how parents want to be engaged in their children's learning, family-teacher communication improves, teachers develop increased feelings of self-efficacy, and families gain greater confidence in supporting children's learning.

- ***Approaches are feasible and effective across multiple settings within the learning ecology***. As the examples in the Playbook show, co-created approaches are being used across a variety of settings, including institutions of higher education, schools, early childhood programs, and libraries, among others. And in some cases, the approaches are used as a way to bridge these multiple learning contexts. For example, the Readiness Through Integrative Science and Engineering Project (RISE) at Tufts University utilizes the Funds of Knowledge approach to connect university-based researchers to teachers and families in local Head Start programs to create a science, technology, and engineering curriculum that is based on families' knowledge and strengths.

- ***Data play an important role in understanding and assessing capacity building for co-creation.*** Data are the vehicle to learn about and improve programs and services. They are also important to track and gauge the influence of programs and services on families, children, and the broader systems and environments in which children and families grow and thrive. All of the examples in the Playbook have some type of evaluation associated with them, whether the approach to data itself involves families as deeply embedded in co-constructing the evaluation process—as does participatory evaluation—or whether the method is evaluated through a randomized control designed experiment, like that of the coaching element of Incredible Years. Regardless of the evaluation method, data play an important part of understanding change and growth over time.

Using the Family Engagement Playbook

There are a number of ways that faculty, trainers, organizational leaders, and technical consultants from a variety of settings, including schools, early childhood programs, afterschool programs, and libraries, among others, can use the Playbook to promote practitioner competencies, interpersonal relationships, and organizational support for co-created family engagement. For example:

- **Faculty at institutions of higher education** might use the framework to design courses as a resource for students to better understand the breadth of approaches that exist to family-school-community partnerships, and even as the basis of a final project in which students choose an approach and do further research on it.
- **Principals** might adopt one or more of the approaches as the basis of a schoolwide capacity-building project in line with schoolwide family engagement goals.
- **Teachers** might also choose to learn more about the approaches from the resources found at the end of each description, discuss them in grade-level meetings, and try them out in their classrooms.
- **Library and afterschool staff** might use the Playbook to garner new ideas to incorporate into staff development and continuing education.
- **Early childhood education providers** might use the Playbook with parent advisory councils and try out approaches of interest in different ways. They might also use the framework of the Playbook to align family engagement goals (for example, inclusion and cultural responsiveness, building peer-to-peer connections, promoting family well-being) and capacity-building efforts.
- **Parent leaders** can review and talk about the Playbook, discuss the various approaches, and develop plans to talk with schools and communities about ways they'd like to see the approaches implemented.
- **Consultants and coaches** who offer capacity-building services might choose one or more approaches from the Playbook for workshops, mini-courses, and support activities.

Join the conversation!

We want to hear from you. We invite you to use the Playbook, share your ideas with us, nominate other approaches you've used, and let us know if you want to try it out. Over the coming months, we plan to add new approaches to the Playbook and present a set of articles and other companion materials to help highlight the value of these methods in action.

Table 1. A matrix of Family Engagement Playbook approaches, benefits, and examples.

Change Mindsets		
Approach	**Description**	**Benefits**
Case Method	The case method of instruction uses realistic stories that invite teachers and families to take one another's perspective and engage in critical thinking and problem solving.	Improvements in educator attitudes, self-awareness, analytical skills, and reflective decision making.
Coaching	Coaching is a relationship-based process, led by an expert, to support an educator's learning, skill development, and on-the-job growth.	Improvements in student outcomes, teacher practice, and early childhood program quality.
Photo Voice	Photo voice enables individuals to represent their lives through photography.	Improved knowledge among educators and community members about families and communities' lives and needs.
Gaming	Gaming refers to the inclusion of elements that are traditionally found in video and board games—like point accrual, competition, and rewards—into learning contexts.	Increased likelihood to take risks and try out new ideas.

Build Relationships		
Approach	**Description**	**Benefits**
Community Immersion	Community immersion allows individuals who are not familiar with the people and communities where they work to embed themselves in these settings.	Improved self-understanding and critical consciousness among teachers.
Digital Simulation	Digital simulations employ avatars or actors to portray different educator, family, and child roles, and allow users to problem solve and make decisions.	Increased capacity of novice teachers to discriminate between effective and less-effective forms of professionalism in parent-teacher communication and increased efficacy among home visitors in building positive relationships with families.
Service Learning	Service learning integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection.	Enhanced ability among prospective teachers to self-reflect, identify, and appreciate strengths of diverse families and greater self-awareness and humility in building positive relationships with children and families of diverse backgrounds.
Cafés	Cafés bring people together in a comfortable environment to talk about issues that matter in order to meet specific goals.	Increased shared understanding of issues different families face, improved social connections and relationships, and improved capacity for collaborative efforts.
Community Dialogues	Community dialogues provide a structured opportunity for individuals from varying backgrounds to come together to speak about their experiences with race and to work collaboratively toward positive change.	Increased awareness of issues related to race and racism, improved connections among stakeholders, stronger school-family connections, and more positive school climate.

Transform Organizations		
Approach	**Description**	**Benefits**
Participatory Evaluation	In a participatory evaluation, a partnership exists between program evaluators and program participants to understand the ways a particular program or service is making a difference for the participants themselves.	Increased confidence and understanding of how to use data for improvement and more opportunities for real-time program improvement.
Human-Centered Design Thinking	Human-centered design thinking is a problem-solving approach used to create new products and services based on knowing and empathizing with people.	Increased empathy and perspective taking among educators and professionals; stronger relationships between families and educators; and more effective family engagement practices.
Project-Based Learning	In project-based learning, participants—with the guidance of an instructor—create their own learning through the development of projects.	Gains in motivation to learn among participants.
Family Service Learning	Family service learning is an approach for whole families—including children, parents, grandparents, and others—to give back to their community while spending quality time with one another.	Increased commitment among organizations to try out programs that are co-created with families; increased social capital, confidence, and self-efficacy among participating families.
Collaborative Teaming	Collaborative teaming engages a group of people to share information and gain understanding that promotes individual and group capacity to achieve common goals.	Better understanding among school leaders of how parents want to be engaged in their children's learning; improved family-teacher and family-family communication; increased teacher efficacy to partner with families in student learning; and greater confidence among families to support children's education.

[1] Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E. & Caspe, M. (2018). *Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next Generation Family Engagement Engaging Families to Transform Education.* Retrieved from https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Joining-Together-to-Create-a-Bold-Vision-for-Next-Generation-Family-Engagement-Engaging-Families-to-Transform-Education; Liedtka, J., Salzman, R., & Azer, D. (2017). *Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector.* Retrieved from https://cup.columbia.edu/book/design-thinking-for-the-greater-good/9780231179522; Jacoby, S. & Ochs, E. (1995). Co-construction: An introduction. Research on Language and Social Interactions, 28(3), 171-183. DOI: 10.1207/s15327973rlsi2803_1

[2] Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018

[3] Global Family Research Project (2018). Human-Centered Design: An Innovative Tool for Professional Learning in Family Engagement. Retrieved from https://globalfrp.org/Articles/Human-Centered-Design-An-Innovative-Tool-for-Professional-Learning-in-Family-Engagement; Caspe, M., & McWilliams, L. (2019). 5 benefits of human-centered design thinking for family engagement. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/GFRPHCD4FE

[4] Harvard Family Research Project. Professional Development. Evaluation Exchange Vol. 11 (4) 12-13. Retrieved from https://archive.globalfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/professional-development