

**Office of Head Start**  
**Strengthening Staff – Parent Partnerships**  
**Family Service Workforce Meeting**  
April 20 – 21, 2010

**A Summary of Meeting Ideas, Practices and Recommendations**

In April 2010, the Office of Head Start (OHS) convened a meeting of 37 participants with a vested interest in the work of Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) Family Service. Parents, front-line family service staff, social workers, trainers, professors, researchers, and consultants came together to discuss the Head Start family service workforce giving consideration to various perspectives on professional development, organizational approaches, and best practices in partnering with families.

OHS Director Yvette Sanchez emphasized the important role that family service workers play, along with all Head Start staff, in ensuring that parents and families are engaged and involved in Head Start opportunities. She acknowledged the pressures and stressors that many HS/EHS families and communities face, and she acknowledged the critical role that family service workers play in their partnership work with families, in their program and community service coordination efforts, and ultimately in the contributions they make in strengthening and supporting the relationships between parents and children to enable children to optimally learn and develop.

**Conditions and Dynamics that Shape Family Service Worker Practice**

Head Start Collaboration Directors Grace Whitney (CT) and Lilli Copp (FL) lead a discussion on their efforts and the efforts of their colleagues, Gina Ruther (IL) and Eleanor Kirkland (NE), to describe the family service workforce from their respective states. They noted that each state possessed unique characteristics and different program configurations. While these differences illustrated the diversity of family services delivery in Head Start, variations created a challenge for implementing best practices. This led to the directors' mutual understanding of the complex dynamics that shape and affect family service workers in various programs, communities, and states. For example, they observed that across their states there are the following:

- a lack of consistency in the role of family service workers in Head Start programs;
- a wide variation of titles for family support services workers;
- different roles and responsibilities among school systems;
- a need for current resources;
- a need to develop more partnerships and relationships, and the capacity to maintain these relationships despite the increase in caseloads of family service workers;
- standardized supervision (supervisors and supervisory approaches for managing family service staff can differ greatly).

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**HS/EHS Research Findings in Areas of Interest to the Family Service Workforce:**  
**Everyone Has a Role in Supporting the Parent-Child Relationship**

Rachel Chazan Cohen works on EHS research out of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, and she shared findings on four key areas: relationships, parenting, effective home visiting, and maternal depression. These key areas are directly and indirectly affected by the work of family service staff.

**Relationships:** A shared belief is that the parent-child relationship is key for a program's success. Therefore, EHS is improving the parent-child relationship. Parents in EHS are engaged in more positive and less negative behavior. EHS studies have proven that parents are the most important link in affecting their child's outcomes. Research has also confirmed that a parent's personal relationship with staff is the deciding factor in that family's decision to remain in the program.

**EHS/HS Parenting:** Across the birth to five program (more EHS-centered), parents engage in more activities with their children to support language and literacy. For example, parents are reading to their children more. There is also less spanking and more talking to children as a discipline strategy. In the FACES descriptive study of preschool-aged children, the more activities parents engaged in with their children, the better the child's positive outcomes.

**EHS and Home Visiting:** EHS staff who work with families tend to possess higher academic degrees than other Head Start program staff. Home-based teachers have more degrees than center-based teachers. It was found that providers are doing a lot of things that are focused on child development in contrast to family development.

Lori Roggman developed the Home Visiting Rating Scale, which is based on the theory that to ensure high quality, home visits need to be thoroughly planned; home visitors should effectively engage parents and children; and home visits should focus on child development within the context of the parent-child relationship. This rating scale focuses on the need for programs to examine parenting and to focus on the parent-child relationship, but the development of parents as individual adults is just as important.

**Mitigating the Effects of Depression on the Parent-child Relationship:** It is a challenge to engage parents who are struggling with depression. It has been found that more than half of the women who are enrolled in EHS scored high enough on inventory tests to be considered depressed. Moms that struggle with depression have parenting behaviors that can lead to negative child outcomes. EHS programs were able to engage these mothers in an effort to improve parent-child interactions. These efforts led to increased positive child outcomes. The bottom line is that home visitors need a lot of support and reflective supervision.

Research shows that having a parent enjoy their child does a tremendous amount of good for the child. The importance of focusing on child development within the context of child and parent relationships

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poses a challenge when there are only two home visits. What can everyone in a program do to support the parent-child relationship?

**Professional Development Opportunities for Family Service Staff**

The following is a summary of participant responses to six key questions related to professional development and the family service workforce.

***1) What circumstances make a difference for families and children in Head Start programs? (What are the kinds of things you see making a difference?)***

- Developing and maintaining strong relationships with staff.
- Keeping in mind that EHS works with many single parents and must provide the same level of comprehensive services to working families.
- Operating from a strength-based approach as opposed to using a deficit model.
- Ensuring families are not feeling judged.
- Having access to family advocates that are skilled at matching resources to families.
- Developing a support system that begins with Head Start and moves beyond Head Start.
- Connecting to services – helping families close that circle, helping families throughout their EHS/HS experience; following -up and walking beside families during the help-seeking process.
- Meeting families' immediate needs: food, shelter, and safety.
- Celebrating all successes.

***2) Question targeting participants who administer/operationalize credentialing programs: What do you admire most about the people you train/teach?***

- Attitude and commitment to serving families.
- Innovation and resourcefulness. Family service work can often be a thankless job and family service staff make things happen – amazing things in their community – on a very limited budget.
- Family Service Workers have fewer opportunities for trainings than education staff. When direct service workers receive training, they receive validation of the importance of their work.
- Their level of flexibility. They wear so many hats – helping families; facilitating/monitoring family partnerships; helping families in crisis; and providing support to teachers. Their level of flexibility is incredible.
- Their cultural and linguistic empathy.
- Their boundless energy, and the amount of time they spend on families is beyond what is expected;
- Family advocates treat their role as a calling, not a job. We respect their roles – they design and customize their own training. I want to do more for them, celebrate them more.

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- As Head Start changes/evolves, [family service workers] come up with innovative ideas. They are so grateful for training and they would like to be credentialed.
- The beauty of their natural abilities. They can really make families feel welcome.
- Their passion for their work with families.
- As a former parent, I think the greatest thing is the fact that even though the Family Service Worker heard my story many times before, she never made me feel like I was one of many.

**3) Question targeting participants who administer/operationalize credentialing programs: *What are the circumstances that help the people you train/teach thrive in their learning?***

- The chance to have ongoing opportunities to be reflective on their practices.
- The support of their administrator and supervisor is also important.
- Providing them the time to get the training.
- Reflective supervision really helps them to take what they've learned and practice their critical thinking skills in a nice safe environment.
- Helping them learn to say no to prevent burnout.
- Good holistic support is important, matching people in their points of life; paying attention to their outside life as well as their work life.
- [Family service workers] need to be part of the team; if they don't feel that they are a part of the team, not much is going to get accomplished.
- Reflective supervision allows them to practice and discuss the implementation piece. We also have a family service workers forum for them to share challenges and best practices.
- Sometimes for the staff, it is getting down to the basics. They are great caregivers and nurturers but don't necessarily have the time management or paperwork management skills. They are often under mountains of work. When we give them the documentation skills so that they can work smarter and easier, it gives them more time to do the actual face-to-face work with families. Getting them some of these basic skills, allows them to do what they like to do (face-to-face work with families) the most.
- One of the best things we do is allow them one day a month to rally together and compare notes and compare scenarios.
- A mental health day to work together.

**4) *What are the five most important areas of knowledge or skills that help family service staff work effectively with families?***

- As a supervisor interviewing someone for a family service worker position, people skills, having good interpersonal skills is just as important as education.
- Cultural competencies are very important – their ability to work with families with different cultural backgrounds, different family environments, different family compositions.
- When I think about working effectively with parents and with social services, I often think of a social worker – be empathetic and self-reflective.

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- Continuing education for staff to better work with parents and to better address the complexity of the issues parents are facing.
- Active listening is very important with respect to parents and to co-workers.
- Flexibility to juggle their tasks, while also not being judgmental. We also need someone who has the knowledge about the basic resources in the community.
- Our staff needs to respect and realize and understand the generational poverty, especially in our Native communities, to be better prepared to negotiate and advocate for the family.
- Critical reflection – all skills are crucial but behind all of them is a need to be able to critically reflect. This is crucial to transformative learning.
- Head Start should work more closely with the idea of [transformative learning](#) to help the workers and then the parents reflect on what is their own cultural and personal makeup, what are their underlying assumptions.
- It is very important that family service workers know what the [family's] goal is.
- Understanding family service work in the context of an organizational structure makes the work more meaningful.
- Family services staff almost need a counseling background.
- Good assessment skills – someone who can convey to a parent that they truly and deeply care for that parent. Mediation and conflict resolution is important.
- Staff [members] need to identify the lens through which they view life – their biases and values. This gives freedom to work more closely with families. Listening, communication, and respect are important.
- Appreciating and valuing every family member; good facilitation of problem solving skills; being able to activate people's hopes and dreams; engender motivation in families.
- Good communication skills – “just because I'm talking doesn't mean I'm being understood.” Just because there is a lot of dialogue with families doesn't mean that there is good communication going on. Questioning skills are also important.
- There may be a question of mindset not knowledge. All too often for many in Head Start, the agency's goal is to get the paperwork done. The mindset should be that work with families is an evolving process. For some families, it is going to take all year to reach goals; and for other families it may take longer, and for others they may refocus/revise their goals several times.
- The ability to build relationships with parents and community agencies and resources.

***5) What challenges do you and your trainees/students run into when training/teaching to these areas? How do you address those challenges?***

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- Time management and case management. Using technology to help with time and case management so that families just don't fall through the cracks.
- Travel – in my agency we are spread in a rural area and have to travel a lot to take classes.
- I've noticed a resistance to go to training. For the education staff we can get a substitute. If a family service worker is gone for a week for training, the work piles up. There is no substitute for them.
- How do we treat people in training? How they need to be treated? These questions need to be addressed in the training experience. An isolated trainee is just as bad as an isolated parent.
- [A] solution we came up with was telephone supervision, pairing up family service workers.
- Affirmation of their work is such a great thing; having a career lattice that is not just piecemeal validates and empowers family service staff. They are able to view their work from a macro level and are managing from the bottom up.
- Sometimes the field staff don't often feel as supported by management and they see that nobody in their agency is in the position to effect change. They feel really powerless. Training at the supervisory level would be helpful.
- Trainings should be useful and relevant. How can we make the topics really easy to search? How can they research and obtain useful information on relevant topics as they occur in the field?
- One of the challenges is the way we compartmentalize departments.
- One barrier is lack of support from spouses (the spouse feels threatened when the partner comes home with degrees) and community (in some of the communities, education is not valued and there is no support for the staff).
- A lot of the times being both the provider of services and the receiver of services is tough.
- Something that is missing in the system is a framework in which the family service worker functions. There needs to be a parallel framework, a developmental continuum, a national framework we can all agree on that would serve all of us.
- More support and training is needed around abuse and neglect.
- When you do have a parent who moves through the ranks, it is akin to teachers becoming directors. It is a transition and it is difficult. This is the same thing for parents who are promoted into working in a center. The transition of a parent into working in a center needs to be attended to specifically.

**Examples of Program Approaches: Professional Development, Organization and Family Partnership Practices**

**Education, Professional Development, and Training** – Nora Melendez, FCP Program Support Specialist, Community Action Commission of Santa Barbara County (CACSB), California

Ms. Melendez described a professional development model that has proven to be successful at CACSB. The home educator and the EHS director take on the family services worker role. The program implements a [site-based management model](#) that recognizes the staff's natural talents and abilities. CACSB provides staff with the training and technical assistance to enhance and sharpen those skills and abilities.

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To become a Family Service Worker III, CACSB takes into consideration staff's years of experience as well as their formal education.

**Organizational Design and Approach** – Angela Foster-Snow, Early Head Start Director, Fairbanks Native Association, Alaska

The Fairbanks Native Association Early Head Start in Alaska works with many very young children and families. Ms. Foster-Snow showed a picture of a parent who went through the CDA mentoring program. Ms. Foster-Snow reported, "She [the parent] is continuing on with her AA. I just wrote a letter of recommendation for her."

Every year at least one profound home visiting story unfolds. An example is one of a family who adopted a family of children and needed their family service worker's help because of flooding. The family service worker traveled by helicopter to help this family.

For this EHS program, relationships with families are very important; therefore, there is a need to strengthen the relationship-building process within the program. Angela Foster-Snow shared pictures of families: one of a single dad with a daughter, another of a stay-at-home dad – a new dynamic for the program.

A huge paradigm shift has been recognizing the important role of child development in the placement of the children. The Fairbanks Native Association Early Head Start is now a state model. They have incorporated the philosophy of the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) into program practices. The program recognized the need to garner program-wide support to implement the CSEFEL philosophy/approach to working with families. It has been a big step for the Fairbanks Native Association EHS program and it has been successful.

Ms. Foster-Snow reported another challenge: hesitancy/reluctance to serve children with same sex parents.

There are also high levels of alcohol abuse in families. In the future, Fairbanks Native Association EHS will expand their partnerships to include women's treatment programs. This expansion will ensure that women receive a continuum of care. The home visitor, with whom the parent has developed a trusting relationship, will accompany the parent to the treatment facility

**Quality Practices and Interventions with Families** – Maria Gonzalez-Blacketer, Family Service Specialist, Community Action Program, Inc. of Western Indiana

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Ms. Gonzalez-Blacketer reported that the Community Action Program, Inc. of Western Indiana serves seven counties and operates an EHS center-based and home-based program, along with Head Start.

The program delivers services to families based on a [three-tiered model](#) , and is designed for individual families. The model was introduced to help families navigate the welfare reform process. This model was built on the belief that it is best to build on a family's existing foundation.

Ms. Gonzalez-Blacketer shared the difficulties of establishing and providing ongoing training for staff. The benefits and outcomes of a balanced caseload improve quality of services, and families become more invested in the family partnership process. As a result of using ChildPlus to update all family data, the program spends less money.

She also pinpointed the factors driving the process – Is the program truly making a long-term impact with the families they serve? How can it be measured?

The Family Service Design is implemented throughout the entire program. It is home-based and center-based. The foundation of the pyramid is staff/family/community.

Outcome data is collected quarterly. The important milestones are documented: are the families making progress; are the families reaching goals; and what did the families celebrate?

All family service staff have caseloads at different tier levels.



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**Comments and Recommendations**

At the close of the two-day meeting, participants were provided an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas about important next steps. A summary of their responses to the question can be found below:

***Question: You have an opportunity to inform the critical next steps for the Office of Head Start. What would be your recommendation(s) to move the family service workforce forward?***

- **91%** of participants identified the importance of normalizing/defining caseloads for staff who work with families.
- **86%** of participants acknowledged the importance of creating intentional professional development opportunities to learn /understand family service work via networking and participating in credentialing programs and other types of training.
- **73%** of participants recognized the importance of implementing a career development/professional development structure that supports a connection between family service work, levels of education, and a career.
- **50%** of participants identified the importance of imbuing the tenets of parent/child interactions (relationship-building); analogous to CSEFEL and other research focused materials/data.

Additional suggestions and priorities included:

- developing family outcomes;
- analyzing the Program Information Report (PIR) language and consider some revisions;
- providing specific training for managers; and
- providing more monetary support for the workforce.

**Other Resources that were disseminated during the meeting:**

- [Family and Community Partnerships- National Snapshot](#)
- [Determinants of Father Involvement: Its Influence on Child Development](#)
- [The Parenting and Child Development Workgroup](#)
- [Early Head Start Home Visiting: Recent Lessons Learned](#)