

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Family-Professional Partnerships in Head Start: Practical Strategies Using a Partnership Intervention

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This research to practice summarizes the findings of a study of family-professional partnerships in a Head Start. Head Start's commitment to family partnership, makes the program selected an exemplar for positive beliefs about families and the importance of partnership. Using the foundations of self-determination as a context for intervention, intentional interactions and increased understanding of both the teachers and the family members helped the research team better understand if the intervention was feasible in a Head Start setting. This summary includes the methods, findings, and practice implications for the study. Implications include the importance of home and school collaboration to mutually benefit children with special and unique learning needs.

Keywords: partnership, Head Start, self-determination, early childhood, family engagement

The purpose of this study was to examine the partnership interactions of Head Start teachers and families as they worked together on mutual goals. Head Start policy and practice views *family engagement* as a positive and goal-oriented partnership grounded in the foundations of program leadership, continuous improvement, and professional development. Characteristics of *family partnership*, a key tenet of family engagement, are (a) building relationships with families, (b) supporting family well-being, (c) encouraging strong relationships between parents and their children, and (d) providing ongoing learning and development for parents and children (Administration for Children and Families, 2011). Head Start promotes family partnership as a way for families to successfully complete their identified goals. This understanding of family-professional partnership is consistent with other definitions used in special education research (Summers et al., 2012; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

Head Start's *Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework*, is a research-based organizational guide for implementing performance standards (Administration for Children and Families, 2011) using coordinated and systematic practices across programs. This framework enhances the understanding of and support for families who play critical roles in their children's long-term success (Administration for Children and Families, 2011). The framework helps Head Start staff to promote family partnerships, in the multiple contexts of family and

community engagement, across Head Start settings. The Head Start program we chose to examine was one that was known within the early childhood community to have strong family-professional partnerships.

OUR METHOD: FAMILY PARTNERSHIP INTERVENTION

We use family partnership to describe relationships between families and teachers at Head Start. Family-professional partnerships are equal collaborative relationships that benefit families, professionals, and children equally. Families and professionals defer to each other's judgment and expertise (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). While it is critical to agree on the importance of promoting family engagement and partnership, practitioners need practical strategies on how to promote partnerships. Focusing on the development of self-determination skills, the Foundations Intervention is intended to provide a system to promote a child's skills in choice-making, self-regulation, or engagement. The intervention involves families and practitioners working together on behalf of the child to complete a simple problem-solving process with four components: *Assess*, *Select*, *Try It*, and *Reflect*. Because the Foundations Intervention involves such close family and teacher cooperation at each step, we wondered how their participation might affect the quality of the partnership. To find out, we asked two research questions using a single program case study. With the first question, we sought to explore participants' beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures related to family-professional partnerships at their Head Start site before implementation of the Foundations Intervention. The second question enabled us to examine how parents and teachers participating in the Foundations Intervention perceived their experience in terms of their partnerships.

The first research question regarding identifying pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and administrative structures at the Head Start program related to family-professional partnerships is an important one to understand within any Head Start location. The Head Start performance standards emphasize family-professional partnerships, but each program site may interpret and implement standards differently. We wanted to examine one program's interpretation of the performance standards along with formal and informal structures supporting family-professional partnerships. Our second research question guided us to examine aspects of the Foundations Intervention that participants believed were important for influencing partnerships. In this qualitative case study we interviewed the Head Start administrator, teachers, and parents of three children who were either a) identified as having a disability (served via Individual Educational Program, IEP), or b) considered to be at risk for referral for special services. We also observed the classrooms and participated with the parent and teacher partners as they went through the Foundations Intervention.

In order to better understand the Foundations Intervention, it is important to explain what happened at each of the four components as they relate to the partnership. Throughout the process, the parent and teacher relied on a facilitator to guide them through the Intervention. First, the *Assess* process involved the parent, teacher, and facilitator in the use of a modified version of the Routines-Based Interview (McWilliam, Casey, & Sims, 2009) which we called the Home-School Conversation Guide. Using this guide, the teachers and parents reflected together on the children's daily routines at home and school and identified areas of strengths and concerns about the child's ability to make choices, regulate his or her behavior, or engage with materials or peers. Second, the *Select* process required the family member, teacher, and facilitator to work

together to *select* a short-term goal (for example, eight to ten weeks). This short-term intervention is different from goals developed for the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, as IEP goals are annual. Once the partners agreed on a specific goal for home and school, the facilitator helped the family member and teacher determine the child's expected outcome on a five-point scale. The *Try It* step, which is third, included both the family member and the teacher trying one or more strategies. A key feature of this step involved asking teachers and family members to use a flip camera or videophone to record the child trying the identified strategy, then sharing what happened at home and school. Fourth, the *Reflect* step required the family member and teacher to think together about how well their strategies worked and to reach a consensus score on the five-point scale. The collaborative reflection resulted in selection of a new goal for both home and school or revision of the strategies to continue working on the existing goal. In our findings, we present a description of the participants' interactions and decisions as they worked together to implement each of the steps of the Foundations Intervention.

FINDINGS

Head Start Foundations Supporting Partnerships

The teachers, family members, and administrators shared their perceptions about how the Head Start program organization influenced their ability to establish good partnerships between teachers and families. Each partner provided important information to explain their beliefs.

Understanding Head Start's commitment to partnerships. Our study examined what participants understood about family-professional partnerships and their responsibilities within a Head Start program. The program administrator spoke about Head Start's long-term commitment to families as partners, and in particular the responsibility to support families facing multiple challenges in their homes and in classrooms. The teachers in this study often relied on co-workers who had at one time been Head Start parents, for support in working with the families of children in their classroom. With respect to family members' perceptions about Head Start's level of support for and partnership with families, one parent identified Head Start staff as advocates for her child and the Head Start program as a place where she felt her child was safe. For the other parents, the quality of the partnership they experienced was more related to their relationship with individual teachers.

National performance standards and administrative structures emphasizing family support and participation. The program administrator and the Head Start staff members in the study identified Head Start Performance Standards as an important part of the program's administrative structure. With the support of extensive professional development activities, the administrator expected teachers to know, understand, and implement Head Start performance standards. In their interviews, all three of the teachers identified the Head Start performance standards as a guide for their efforts to engage families. These teachers also gave examples of barriers that they thought affected their ability to interact with families, including paperwork demands, staff turnover, and staff shortages. All of these participants agreed that these barriers impeded their ability to implement partnerships with families to the degree they

would like, such as time to talk to each parent at the beginning or end of each day and time to make phone calls or home visits to families.

Local Head Start leadership. Parents and teachers said they believed that strong family-professional relationships were a priority for the program administrator of this Head Start program. The administrator believed her dual role as a parent of a child with a disability and as a Head Start professional strengthened her ability to understand family-professional partnerships. Families were less certain about leadership roles.

Influence of Participating in the Foundations Intervention

With these administrative structures in place, we explored how participating in the Foundations Intervention influenced the partnerships between families and teachers. Based on our interviews and observations, we found participants identified several important factors involved in building partnerships: setting and attaining related goals that focused on a child need at both home and school; sharing knowledge about home and school environments; collaborating in working toward each child's goals; and encouraging interactions characterized by enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment.

Developing shared goals. For this component of the Foundations intervention, the parent and teacher chose a goal for the child based on specific child needs. The parent and teacher considered the challenges the child faced in one or more of the three Foundations areas (e.g., engagement, choice making, and self-regulation) during the course of the day at home and at school. Although they were not required to do so, two of the three families and teachers in this study chose similar goals for the child to work on at home and at school. Both the teachers and parents thought that having a shared goal brought them closer as partners because it enabled them to communicate more often and problem solve on joint strategies at home and at school.

Gaining shared knowledge of the child's environments. Both the families and teachers thought that their participation in the Foundations Intervention gave them a better understanding of the child's routines, interests, and activities at home, and vice versa, in the classroom. Family members said they had better understanding of their child's day at Head Start and of their child's school routines, interests, and activities, after participating in the Foundations Intervention. They found out their children's teachers faced similar, or slightly different struggles in the classroom as they did at home.

Collaborating in work on the child's goals. Once both partners shared an understanding of what happened at home and school, they were able to target the specific goals set to better support the child in both environments. Both families and teachers felt this mutual dialogue was helpful and agreed that the video exchange that was part of this study increased clarity regarding best use of suggested strategies.

Interacting with families through enhanced communication, high expectations, and commitment. Because they were working together on specific but related goals and selected strategies, communication became a more purposeful activity. Families thought that

their children's teachers had higher expectations for their child in class, were more committed to making adjustments for goal success, and experienced better communication with their children during the Head Start day. Positive interactions between the child and the teacher tended to lead to positive assessments of the interactions between families and teachers.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This study helped us to determine that the Foundation Intervention was a framework that could build practical strategies into the family-professional partnership. The Foundations Intervention involves partners sharing information for a specific purpose. The importance of sharing information across home and school settings is consistent with findings in other studies. (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Brotherson et al., 2008). Some examples of the most practical aspects of the study are below.

Using a Tool for Assessing the Child's Strengths and Needs

The Foundations Intervention *Home-School Conversation Guide* formatted comparable home and school routines side-by-side on each page to invite the family members and teachers to think together. This process stressed assessing the strengths and needs of both the child and the family. Questions included How does your day start? What works well during your day? How often do you see that behavior during snack time? Using a tool like this provides a structure for a conversation between the teacher and parent to share information. Many times, the facilitator briefly introduced the tool which enabled family and teacher partners to have an immediate context for a rich and detailed discussion of child abilities and needs.

Selecting the Same Short-Term Goals and Accompanying Strategies

The discussion about measuring goals generated strategies for the parent and teacher to try as they worked toward the goal. Often the family and professional partnership was even stronger when the family member and teacher agreed to work on a related goal at home and in school.

Trying Strategies at Home and Preschool

Once the goal was identified the family member and the teacher would problem solve strategies to address the goal in both environments. While setting related goals was most effective, different strategies could be used in both environments, to support specific child needs. When families and teachers shared their successes/challenges with each other (e.g., video or other communication) the strategies could be adapted and modified as appropriate. The sense of having a mutual project and sharing information on progress can create enthusiasm and deepen partnership.

Collaboratively Reflecting on How The Strategies Worked

With the facilitator's help, the parent-teacher dyad reflected on how the process worked for them and the child. At a minimum, the dyad reflected on "What worked best?" and "What could they have changed?" This reflection in some cases led to identification of more goals for the child creating a continuous cycle of shared goals. In contrast to more typical parent-teacher interactions, participation in the Foundations Intervention included goal setting leading to specific tasks both the parent and teacher agreed to do; a short timeframe to work on a shared goal; frequent interactions and sharing to explain what they were doing both at home and in the classroom; and an equal playing field or common context between the teacher and the family, with assistance from a facilitator.

CONCLUSION

Our findings in this study suggest that family and professional participation in the Foundations Intervention may influence partnerships, especially in a program in which staff have compatible beliefs about families and the importance of partnership. Teachers at Head Start perceived that interacting with families and supporting them to address challenges as part of their jobs did not lead to attributing any problems in partnerships to the families themselves. These attitudes among staff members clearly indicate their respect and support for families. This perspective contrasts with findings in other research where teachers or other early childhood professionals often identified family characteristics as barriers to high-quality home-school relationships (Hadley, 2012; Marchini, 2011; Trainor, 2010). The Foundations Intervention also enhanced the quality and effectiveness of home visits by teachers and classroom staff that took place twice a year. Because communication between the family member and teacher was purposeful, the participants reported that the frequency and quality of their communications increased over time. The Foundations Intervention provided structure for intentional interactions and increased understanding of both the parents and the teachers. It also was a good match for what was in place at Head Start before the intervention, ensuring the intervention was feasible to use. Participation in Foundations Intervention reinforced and enhanced the existing practices at targeted Head Start program.

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that partnership interventions, such as the Foundations Intervention, could become a valuable tool supporting family-professional partnerships in Head Start and other early childhood programs.

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