6 Reimagining Family Engagement: Six Critical Shifts

The developmental relationships framework points to critical opportunities to energize and reframe the ways schools, organizations, and communities partner with families.

Don't forget the families! This report's title is a starting point for action. Rather than ignoring, compensating for, blaming, or otherwise overlooking the resources and strengths of America's diverse families, it is time to rethink and reimagine why and how we partner with families in our schools, programs, and coalitions.

If taken seriously, this study's findings can help to catalyze two important, interlocking agendas:

1 *Don't Forget the Families* challenges us to **move beyond platitudes about the importance of relationships in young people's lives.** How do we become much more intentional and specific about the kinds of relationships kids need at home, at school, and in other places they spend time? The framework of developmental relationships offers a starting point, providing initial evidence that the actions within the framework have potential to help children and youth develop key character strengths that are essential for their success and well-being.

At one level, this report—and other emerging research on developmental relationships—aims to stimulate a broader conversation about developmental relationships for young people across the places where they spend time and among the significant people in their lives. Though we start by examining parent-child relationships in families, we are building theory and evidence that suggest these same kinds of relationships matter across many contexts (such as schools and programs) and relationships (parents, teachers, mentors, and peers).

2 The findings of *Don't Forget the Families* press for **re-examining assumptions about families, their roles in young people's lives, and the fundamental ways schools, organizations, and systems relate to parenting adults.** This study has at least six major implications, each of which requires shifts in how schools, youth programs, and coalitions think about and enact partnerships with families. To be sure, these recommendations are consistent with many effective practices, and we have much to learn from them. However, a more intentional focus, a deeper commitment, and new innovations are needed to fill in this missing piece in America's diverse efforts to help all children succeed.

Shift 1: Start with listening to families

In too many cases, family engagement efforts begin with policy makers, researchers, and professionals determining what families need to do, and then developing messages that will generate "buy-in," support, and participation. They treat parents as consumers, who must be "sold" an agenda in order to be successful in achieving their goals.

Setting aside questions of whether that approach works in consumer product development, marketing, and sales, it is clearly flawed in how we engage families as active agents, partners, and leaders in cultivating key

TAKEAWAYS

These six shifts in emphasis (which some schools, organizations, and coalitions already do) are needed to engage families as key actors and partners in developing key character strengths in young people through developmental relationships.

From a primary focus on . . .	Toward an emphasis on . . .
Starting with messaging to families	Starting with listening to families
Providing programs for families	Building relationships with families
Buying into negative stereotypes of families	Highlighting families' strengths, even amid challenges
Giving families expert advice about what to do	Encouraging families to experiment with new practices
Focusing on parenting as a set of techniques	Emphasizing parenting as a relationship
Building coalitions of formal systems to support children's success	Engaging families in strengthening relationships as a critical component of community coalitions

character strengths and well-being. Leaders in design thinking, improvement science, and other approaches to change and improvement consistently emphasize the critical need to use a variety of means to listen first to stakeholders—not just to get feedback on ideas, but also to develop an empathetic, deep understanding of stakeholders' lived experiences (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Bryk et al., 2015; IDEO, 2015).

Whenever we authentically take time to listen to and build an understanding of parenting adults and children through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and other methods, we are much more likely to abandon simplistic stereotypes or untested assumptions and to partner with them in ways that are more meaningful and more effective.

Shift 2: Emphasize building relationships with families

Educators, social workers, and other professionals who successfully engage families—particularly those families who have been disconnected—invariably point to the critical need to build trust and relationships as a foundation for engagement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Axford et al., 2012; Mason, 2012). To adapt the widely quoted and adapted aphorism, "Parents don't care what you know until they know that you care."

Although the developmental relationships framework focuses on the relationships young people need in their lives, it also suggests new and more effective ways to build relationships between professionals and the young people, parents, and other family members they serve. For example, looking at family engagement through the lens of the developmental relationships framework might lead educators and others to ask themselves questions, such as these:

- To what extent do we *express care* with the families in our networks, including listening to them, showing interest in their lives, and investing in them?
- In what ways do we *challenge growth* by setting clear expectations, inspiring them to be their best—and inviting them to do the same for us as professionals working with their children?
- How do we *provide support* and advocacy when families need it?

- How do we *share power* and responsibility in our efforts, empowering families and developing their autonomy and voice?
- How do we help families *expand possibility*, by connecting them to other people, ideas, and opportunities?

These are not programmatic questions, but relational ones. It is important to note that many people in the community can form these relationships with families, including other families. Thus, the call is not to hire more professionals to form relationships with parenting adults and families, but rather to work with families to embed them in webs of relationships that both support them and fully engage them in the life of the school, organization, or community.

Part of the challenge is that a solid majority of parenting adults is not looking for help from professionals. In our survey, three-fourths of parenting adults believed they knew what they needed to know to be a good parent, and two-thirds believed they should be able to deal with their family's problems on their own. And we know from other research that, when they do want help or support, they will first turn to their extended family and social network, not professionals (Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). Furthermore, families who struggle the most often have weaker social connections and supports (Attree, 2005; Bowman et al., 2012; Melton, 2010).

An opportunity, then, lies in strengthening the formal and informal social bonds—particularly with other families and parenting adults who share common priorities, challenges, and interests—so that families have trustworthy people they can turn to when they need more support or encouragement. Doing so will also cultivate readiness to turn to formal supports in times when they are really needed (Attree, 2005).

This focus on cultivating relationships can be transformative both to the organizations and networks that cultivate them and to the participating families. Maton (2008) examined characteristics of organizations that empowered people to take action for positive social change. At the center of his model is a focus on creating a relational culture. He wrote: "What is apparent across domains and types of settings . . . is the potential of a vital and vibrant relational community, over time, to empower its members" (p. 14).

Shift 3: Challenge stereotypes and highlight strengths in families

As a society, we hold onto a number of myths or preconceptions about families:

- We equate family composition (who is in the family) with family strengths or deficits—even though this study and others have shown both strengths and challenges across all types of families. A key message of this study is that demographics account for very little of the difference in family relationships, and they contribute little to whether children and youth are developing key character strengths. Families of all shapes and sizes can—and do—build developmental relationships.
- We assume that families who don't show up don't care, when the evidence consistently shows that the vast majority of parenting adults do care, even if some don't express it effectively. In addition, their greatest value in young people's development likely lies in what they do at home, which is reinforced by this study as well as other research on family engagement (Mapp & Hong, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014a).
- Because some families don't have much materially, we conclude they don't have much to contribute. So we set up systems in which they are viewed as passive recipients of our expertise or generosity. This paternalistic approach misses the value they bring to community when they are valued as partners and contributors.

The results of this study reinforce that families have both strengths and challenges across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum. Yes, some families struggle with addictions, mental illness, abuse, and other issues that require specialized supports. But it is a mistake to label whole groups of parents as inadequate because of their backgrounds or where they live. Indeed, Attree (2005) found that a consistent barrier for low-income parents seeking and receiving support was professionals who made them feel inadequate or like "bad parents."

We now have an opportunity to begin counteracting the negative stereotypes and, over time, to create a different cultural narrative (and organizational norms) about the strengths of all types of families and their contributions to our communities and society.

Shift 4: Encourage parents to try new approaches to relationships

Developmental relationships form and grow through everyday interactions that occur over time. Sometimes the ways families spend time together and interact with each other effectively cultivate developmental relationships. But families across the spectrum fall into patterns or habits that can be counterproductive—whether it's the ways they do or don't show affection, how they praise or encourage each other, or the ways they keep or share power in family life.

One way schools and youth-serving organizations can begin helping families build developmental relationships is to invite them to try out some new practices or activities that introduce or align with the core actions in the developmental relationships framework. Chapter 7 provides practical tips and relationship-building activities families can do together to explore the essential actions in the framework.

Bringing families together to talk about what works for them and where they get stuck can serve as a starting point for creating a shared commitment to building developmental relationships within families and across the community.

Search Institute's website ParentFurther.com offers a wide range of activities that families can do together to explore and enhance each of the essential actions and action steps in the developmental relationships framework.

Shift 5: Emphasize parenting as primarily a relationship

Judging from social media, TV talk shows, and bookstore shelves, the secret of parenting is to master a set of techniques or strategies that shape or control a child's behaviors. We join with other researchers who have argued that, at its core, parenting is a relationship rooted in mutual affection, attachment, and influence that occur between parenting adult and child (Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Kim, 2012).

The most provocative finding in this study is the importance of sharing power within a developmental relationship. More than any other essential action, Share Power consistently predicted children's development of character strengths and attainment of other key measures of well-being. More than any other, this essential effort exemplifies the bidirectional nature of the parent-child relationship, reinforcing mutuality as an integral part of development. As such, action steps to encourage sharing power might be a good place for parenting adults to experiment with new approaches to building relationships with their children.

Shift 6: Broaden coalitions to include families

Under the banner of "collective impact," many worthwhile efforts are underway in communities across the nation to bring greater coherence and effectiveness to efforts to help all children succeed. Most of those partnerships are focused on achieving goals such as school readiness, third-grade reading proficiency, high school graduation, and post-secondary completion. And most of the people who are participating in the initiatives that are being implemented to achieve those objectives work in schools, out-of-school time providers, social service agencies, and other organizations that influence children's lives.

Those are good goals and many of the right participants. But in many communities, families are the missing piece of the strategy. Truly engaging many families will require an approach that is very different from asking them to support schools in teaching reading and math or to helping to raise money for after-school programs. Supporting parents in building developmental relationships within and beyond their families that benefit their children is a strategy that has untapped potential to help children succeed in school and in life.