

## Insights

# Launch an Early Childhood Parent Academy

Parents  
are their  
child's  
earliest

### Quick Info on Vermilion Parish Parent Academies

- **What:** A series of educational sessions covering key early childhood topics
- **Where:** Schools, health centers, libraries
- **When:** After work hours, twice a month
- **Who:** Parents of children ages 0-4
- **How:** Through a community-based, collaborative approach

teachers, setting the stage for a healthy future and providing the early skills children need to learn, make friends and thrive. It's a big role and one that can bring a lot of pressure, especially given how complicated early childhood health and development can be. Many parents may not understand just how important those early years are; and they may feel overwhelmed trying to figure out which resources they should tap and what actions they should take early.

"Social emotional health, early brain development, early literacy, screenings and performance—there's just so much that a parent is asked to digest," says Sebreana Domingue, a Louisiana team lead for Vermilion Parish, a place-based community in NICHQ's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([ECCS CoIIN](#)). "The parents we work with told us they needed more than pamphlets; they needed more supports. We heard them and decided to rethink how we deliver education."

Domingue and the Louisiana team launched an early childhood parent academy, a structured set of courses that cover key topic areas that parents need to know about early childhood development. The lessons are free, accessible and meant to empower parents through dynamic group learning.

"We launched our parent academy to make it easier for parents to support their children during this complicated age," says Domingue. "Our curriculum breaks important early childhood topics into a series of six sessions. By the end of the series, parents have a better understanding of what early childhood development means, what they can do to support their children, and what resources and supports already exist."

Over the course of the six sessions, Vermilion Parish's Parent Academy reached over 100 parents in their community, empowering them as champions for their children's health. Their success at engaging and educating parents shows the potential that parent academies can have in states and communities across the country.

Helping families engage in language-rich and nurturing relationships, and supporting caregivers in understanding their important role in child development is central to the ECCS COLIN's goal of increasing age appropriate developmental skills among 3-year-old children in the program's participating communities.

"Parent academies provide families with the opportunity to build a strong and accessible social support network," says ECCS COLIN Project Director Zhandra Levesque, MPH. "When we do that, we can strengthen families and systems, mitigate risks and maximize healthy development."

## How to Get Started

Interested in launching your own parent academy? Below, we've provided Louisiana's curriculum as a sample for you to use in your own state or community. Check it out; then keep reading for a list of best practices to ensure your parent academy runs smoothly.

**Sample Curriculum** ([or click here to download](#)).

Weekly Topic	Goals	Strategies for Success
<b>Child Development and Brain Building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce parents to the importance of early child development</li><li>• Assess baseline of parent knowledge</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide a 10-question development quiz before and after the first session (<a href="#">quiz here</a>)</li><li>• Use the quiz to find out what parents know at the beginning, what they learned, and what still exist</li><li>• Use quiz results to shape the agenda for future sessions</li></ul>
<b>Social Emotional Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explain why social emotional development is so important</li><li>• Show parents what social emotional education and learning looks like</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have a "live" demonstration at the local childcare center; parents can see exactly what children are learning and ask teachers questions about any behaviors they have about their children's behavior</li><li>• Include a list of all behavioral milestones for each area</li></ul>

<b>Early Childhood Literacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide parents with resources and ideas for helping their child be prepared to read by kindergarten</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer examples of early literacy activities such as singing and daily reading (<a href="#">Video Out and Read</a> are great resources)</li> </ul>
<b>Preschool Performance Reports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain how different childcare centers are scored</li> <li>• Help parents know how to use those measures to choose the right pre-school program and/or daycare program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk through example cases of how to use reports</li> </ul>
<b>Developmental Screening Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the different types of early childhood screenings and the importance of each</li> <li>• Ensure parents know what steps to take depending on the different screening results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow up with a resource fair for screening resources</li> </ul>
<b>Recap: Child Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure that all parents feel comfortable and confident about the lessons covered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have representatives from community partners attend and provide resources</li> <li>• Possible partners to engage: Medicaid, Early Head Start, childcare centers, schools, Women Infants and Children Program (WIC), libraries</li> <li>• Review notable resources such as milestone tracker and app</li> </ul>

## Best Practices for Planning and Executing a Successful Parent Academy

### 1. Leverage a community-based, collaborative approach

Before the Louisiana team decided to launch the academy, they had meetings with all their community partners, such as Medicaid plans, Head Start, childcare centers and schools, Women Infants and Children Nutrition Program (WIC) and local libraries. “Each partner brought a unique perspective, which helped us think holistically about what topics and materials would be the most supportive for parents,” says Dominique.

Along with developing a robust curriculum, engaging community partners helped the Louisiana team manage the logistics for each session. Each partner chose to sponsor a different session, which ensured instructors and venues were covered right from the start.

### 2. Elevate parent voices

“Unless we talk to parents, we won’t know what they don’t know. We won’t know what they need,” says Domingue, who recommends having a designated Q&A period at each session so parents can share concerns, ask questions and make suggestions. “Whenever a parent suggests a change, we try to make it happen.”

It’s important to remember that engaging parents isn’t just about giving them a place to speak; it’s about making sure what they say is really heard and then using that feedback to inform an approach. Louisiana’s attention to parent engagement paid off. By the end of the first academy, two parents had volunteered to help launch the next series, further cementing parents’ roles as valued stakeholders.

### **3. Conclude each session with a survey to guide the next lesson**

Following each session, the Louisiana team asked all participants to complete a survey to help prepare them for the next session. The survey’s questions gaged parents’ knowledge about the upcoming topic (for example, what can you do to make sure your child enters kindergarten ready to read), and their awareness about available resources. Parents walked away excited for the upcoming session; instructors walked away knowing how to best shape the class for parents’ needs and knowledge.

For improvement teams, the surveys are also an opportunity to collect valuable data. Vermilion Parish’s community team included questions around their key metrics, such as how often parents read to their children, and used the answers to help measure their progress. These metrics not only support the community’s improvement efforts, but also help Louisiana better assess their early childhood systems improvement progress.

### **4. Increase attendance with incentives**

Many parents may not know just how important early childhood development is. Domingue recommends using extra incentives to help get more parents through the door, especially for the first class. Books and toys make great door prizes and gift baskets, and advertising diapers and wipes as a free give-away helped to draw a crowd.

### **5. Promote, promote, promote**

For a parent academy to succeed, parents need to know it’s happening. The Louisiana team posted flyers at schools and on local libraries’ announcement boards and website. Their school partners were especially helpful because they could reach out to pre-kindergarten parents directly, sending them texts and emails about upcoming sessions.

“And remember to leverage social media,” says Domingue. “We posted our flyer on Facebook and shared it with mother groups. We also capitalized on our partners’ media presence by asking them to share it on their social channels.”

*Interested in hearing about more strategies the ECCS CoIIN state teams are leveraging? [Sign up](#) to receive an early childhood development resource packet from the project’s July conference.*