

## Insights

# Five Strategies for Engaging Family Partners

Families have an unmatched impact on their child's health, especially during the early years of life when children's rapidly developing brains are laying the groundwork for their future health and wellbeing. To be the best advocates for their children, families need the right supports, whether they be access to public assistance programs like Medicaid and housing, opportunities to build a strong relationship with their child's health provider, or resources that empower them to support their child's social and emotional health. Right now, the NICHQ-led Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems ColIN ([ECCS ColIN](#)) and [other initiatives](#) across the country are seeking to answer a critical question:

- **How do we improve these supports and their underlying systems to build families' capacity to promote their child's healthy development?**

Pediatricians, early learning experts, state officials, and public health professionals all have important ideas and invaluable experience. But unless families are in the room for the conversations that affect them, the answers to this critical question being posed by ECCS ColIN and others will remain limited. Only families themselves truly understand their own unique circumstances and needs, and only families can tell their own stories. This is one reason why engaging family partners is critical for any improvement effort.

True *family partnership* means families are at the table from the start. Organizations and improvement teams that embody that principle enlist families as experts and ask them to share their unique experiences and perspectives about their families and their communities, and about problems and solutions.

But how do we get families to the table? And how do we engage with them meaningfully as equal partners in improvement? Last fall, we received a number of emails asking these questions. To find the answers, we put our advice into practice and reached out to our ECCS ColIN family partners (those who most understand what can best support their involvement) and fellow team members (those currently working with them as partners in improvement). Below, we've compiled five strategies for developing meaningful family partnerships.

Thank you to the amazing New Jersey ECCS ColIN team who shared their insights in this article: Ericka Dickerson, Nicole Hopkins, Deepa Srinivasavaradan, Laura Taylor, Erin Markan, Ariana Nunez, Karen Benjamin, and David Armstrong.

## 1. Make your approach personal

Reaching out to potential family partners individually and acknowledging that their personal experiences can make a real difference, our family partners share. Start with your own circle of friends—those you already know and share a personal connection with. Who are the parents and caregivers that would benefit from connecting at a deeper level? Who might already be interested in learning more about early childhood development? Who has a personal story or experience that might make this work resonate with them? Consider reaching out directly to these individuals to start a conversation about your work.

Don't lead with the 'ask' though, cautions Karen Benjamin, New Jersey's Essex County team lead; empathy matters. "It's important that you care about the family, and work to first understand their needs. Whether the person is a close friend or someone you only know in passing, you can talk to them about their story, and then connect them with the appropriate resources."



New Jersey Family Partners

These personal conversations provide a genuine foundation to ask families to get involved with your improvement work. It shows how the initiative directly connects to their own experiences, the resources they need, and the supports that will benefit the health of their children and the children in their community.

## **2. Leverage existing community groups and partnerships**

"Our relationships with community partners have been invaluable for connecting with parents already motivated to do this work," says Laura Taylor, Middlesex County team lead. These families can also inspire critical cross-sector collaboration, she continues, helping bridge the work of the initiative with the work currently happening in the community.

"For example," says Taylor, "our Family Success Centers are currently working to infuse early childhood development and literacy into the offerings at their centers. It was natural for ECCS ColIN to partner with them to host education and training for Family Success Center staff on developmental milestones and screening tools."

Similarly, online communities, such as local moms or parenting Facebook groups, can be an important place to connect with passionate families, says Middlesex County Family Partner Erin Markan. And just like in face-to-face settings, she recommends taking a personal approach when reaching out to group members, first engaging with their conversations, offering encouragement, and directing them to resources.

### **3. Create (flexible) family partner job descriptions**

Getting involved in an improvement project is a big ask for parents and caregivers who are already time-strapped and balancing hectic schedules. Developing job descriptions with clear, realistic roles and expectations can help potential partners make informed decisions about their participation.

Descriptions should include details on logistics—expected time commitment, meeting locations, etc.—and describe why family perspectives are needed and will be influential in informing the work. These descriptions validate family partners' critical role on the project and can even help teams pitch participation as a resume builder, which can be another incentive for busy parents, says Markan.

Markan also recommends developing different types of job descriptions that vary depending on the parent's or caregiver's time, resources, knowledge and comfort level. Offering potential partners different tiers of engagement and different roles to choose from can increase participation. And the more parents at the table, the more comfortable and empowered to speak parent partners will feel.

### **4. Make participation as convenient as possible**

Try to accommodate family partners' schedules once they've signed on to the work, the New Jersey family partners urge. Hosting meetings outside of regular work hours and providing childcare on-site can help remove some attendance barriers; but teams should also include opportunities for engagement that don't require in-person attendance. Meetings that family partners can call into, surveys and questionnaires, helping promote events and sharing information are all alternative forms of engagement that can still capture parent's voices and energies. For any of these activities, be sure to provide as much notice as possible (Nicole Hopkins, state team lead and passionate [parent advocate](#), recommends creating a shared family engagement calendar that lists activities six months in advance).

### **5. Empower family voices**

For family engagement to be successful, family partners need to feel comfortable sharing their opinions. David Armstrong, [Essex County family partner](#), recommends providing resources and education on early childhood development, such as CDC's Learn The Signs Act Early training and the Ages & Stages Questionnaire. These resources empower parent voices, not only on the project but also with other families and their communities.

"Once I learned about the science, I felt comfortable walking the walk as a parent leader and talking to other families about child development," says Armstrong. "Everything is data driven—once you have the data to back up your story, you feel more prepared to get in front of

those who are decision makers.”

Skill-building opportunities can also help family partners develop their voice, explains Deepa Srinivasavaradan, who works for New Jersey's SPAN Parent Advocacy Network and is the New Jersey team's parent lead. Letting family partners build the agenda and run internal meetings, bringing them to state conferences, and giving them opportunities to participate on local or state panels all help empower them in their capacities as leaders on the initiative. Similarly, she recommends inviting family partners to connect with Family Organizations in their state, such as state [Family-to-Family Health Information Centers](#), which can provide support, skill-building opportunities, and training on how to share their stories and engage in policy advocacy.

*Interested in hearing more from our family partners? Listen to their presentation on family engagement in [this video](#) from a recent conference. And be sure to check out Armstrong's [Four E's to Empower Parent and Family Leaders](#).*