



# DM&E Tips for Refugee Youth Family Engagement Programs

## Importance of Family Engagement for Refugee Youth and Their Families

Family engagement means encouraging parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives, and guardians to be involved in IRC's programs and in their children's schools.

Studies indicate that parental involvement is linked to children's scholastic achievement and that schools can help refugee families with integrating into their new communities. (1) Newer studies are showing that family involvement with their children's after-school activities is also valuable. (2)

While most practitioners think that family engagement means activities, such as parent classroom volunteering, at a specific site and for a specific program, there are other forms meaningful engagement that must be considered. For example, family engagement may involve learning more about children's schooling, participating in school or program decision-making, or spending extra time with children (3).

## Outcomes of Successful Family Engagement

- ◆ Increased family involvement in children's education and school
- ◆ Enhanced family understanding of local school system and available services
- ◆ Improved relationships between parents and children
- ◆ Higher participation in after-school programs
- ◆ Improved implementation and outcomes for IRC programs
- ◆ Better academic performance and increased graduation rates



## Components of Successful Family Engagement

There are 4 main strategies to better engage families: (4)

### 1. Support Families

*Focus on family assets.* Parents do not want to be perceived only as needing assistance, but also as positive contributors to their children's development. Programs should enhance parents' ability to provide for children. For example, workshops can teach parents new math skills so that they can help their children with their schoolwork.

*Solicit family feedback for programming.* Ask parents what they think about the program, how they can contribute, and how they can be served in return. This can be done easily through a parent suggestion box, regular formal and informal surveys, parent discussion groups, and speaking with parents when they pick up their children.

### 2. Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

*Communicate frequently and in positive ways.* Keeping parents informed about program mission, goals and strategies is one way to engage families. For example, send out newsletters, host an open house and encourage participation in IRC activities. If parents are able to talk with program staff about positive news rather than problems, then they will feel more comfortable.

*Be there for families.* Staff can communicate with families on issues beyond program matters or children's progress. They can also offer families' personal support, opportunities to discuss life challenges and parent counseling. Support groups or adult education programs that address financial planning and immigration are useful tools.

*Provide leadership opportunities.* When parents feel greater ownership of a program, they will be more invested. Parent councils and governing boards are mechanisms for providing this type of involvement. However, these can be difficult to implement given parents' time demands.

### 3. Hire and develop a family-focused, culturally-appropriate staff

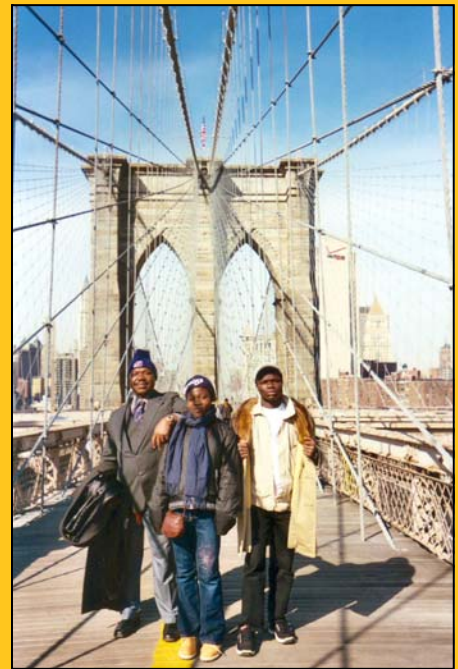
*Designate a staff member to be responsible for family engagement.* This person can focus on conducting family outreach, assessing family needs and planning social and educational activities.

*Train staff to focus on family engagement.* Holding staff meetings and workshops specifically devoted to family engagement will help staff to understand its importance. If staff recognize the significance of even small gestures, like regular informal conversations with parents, then families will feel a greater connection to the program.

*Hire staff who share parents' experiences and backgrounds.* It helps to have staff members who have the same culture and language as families in order to bridge cultural gaps. When language barriers persist, the program should consider translation/ interpretation services. (5)

### 4. Build linkages across individuals and organizations

*Act as a liaison between families in schools.* School liaisons can make sure parents know what to expect from school visits, accompany families to school meetings and strengthen linkages





## Components, continued

between home, school and IRC programs. If parents do not speak English, then they should be matched with a liaison who speaks their language.

*Help parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.* IRC programs can help parents navigate schools and ensure their needs are being met. Both encouraging teachers to explain grade-level expectations to parents and hosting program workshops on school services for parents facilitate understanding of the local school system.

## Key Partners in Achieving Family Engagement

Effective usage of key partnerships involves:

- ◆ Involving **youth** and **families** in the decision-making process
- Hiring **translators/interpreters** so that communication barriers can be overcome
- Informing **schools** about family services offered by the IRC
- Communicating with **other after-school programs** to ensure a support continuum
- Serving as linkage point for **other community agencies**, such as local libraries and community health centers

## Key Indicators

Hard Indicators:

- Frequency of communication between families and program staff
- Children's frequency of attendance at IRC programs
- Changes in children's grades, test scores and school attendance
- Parent participation in IRC activities
- Families' ability to register for school and identify relevant services
- Frequency of parents' attending school meetings accompanied by school liaisons

Soft Indicators:

- Families' understanding of the local school system
- Families' ability to communicate with teachers
- Families' sense of involvement with IRC activities
- Families' understanding of IRC programs

## And always remember...

IRC's 5 programming principles:

- \* Participation
- \* Protecting and promoting rights
- \* Capacity building
- \* Partnership
- \* Holistic programming



## Data Collection and Assessment Methods

Basic data collection tools that can be used to monitor and evaluate the success of college preparation programs include:

- Focus group and individual interviews with parents
- Parent questionnaires
- Parent–program staff communication logs
- Student after-school program attendance
- SAT/PSAT/ACT scores and transcripts (for course selection)
- Attendance at family engagement events (i.e. workshops, adult education classes, social events)

## References for Refugee Youth Family Engagement Programs

1. BRYCS Spring 2007 Spotlight: Involving Refugee Parents in their Children's Education. [brycs.org/brycs\\_spotspring2007.htm](http://brycs.org/brycs_spotspring2007.htm).
2. *Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School*, by Zenub Kakli, Holly Kreider, Priscilla Little, Tania Buck, and Maryellen Coffey. Joint publication of United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Harvard Family Research Project, and Build the Out-of-School Time Network, 2006, 12.
3. Focus on Families
4. Focus on Families
5. BRYCS program description of Refugee Family Services, Inc., Helping Orient Parents and Educate Schools (HOPES) School Liaison Program.

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