

Promoting Family Engagement in Special Education Through the Family-as-Host (FAH) Model and Family Ambassador Resource (FAR) Program

TOOLS FOR CONSISTENT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



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Learn more at KennedyKrieger.org/FamilyEngagement

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Sample Welcome Letter

Dear Families,

Welcome to our classroom and school community! I am excited to partner with you this year to support your child's learning, growth, and success.

You are the expert on your child, and your voice, experiences, and insights are important to our work together. I believe strong family-school partnerships help students feel supported, confident, and successful, both at school and at home.

Throughout the year, I will communicate regularly about your child's progress, strengths, and classroom experiences. Please feel free to reach out with questions, concerns, or ideas at any time.

I would also love to learn more about your child:

- What are their strengths and interests?
- What helps them feel successful?
- What goals or hopes do you have for this school year?

Feel free to complete the "Getting to Know You" family survey I have included with this letter and return it to me. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your child's educational journey. I look forward to us working together.

Teacher Name

Contact Information

Family Survey: Getting to Know You

Student Information

Student Name:

Preferred Name/Nickname:

Family Insights

1. What are your child's greatest strengths?

2. What activities or interests does your child enjoy most?

3. What helps your child feel successful or supported?

4. Are there strategies that work especially well at home?

5. What are your hopes or goals for your child this year?

6. What is the best way and time to communicate with you?

☐ Phone

☐ Text

☐ Email

☐ Other: _____ Best Time to Reach You: _____

7. Is there anything important you would like me to know about your child or family?

Sample Phone Call Script



Beginning-of-Year Family Outreach

Hello, this is **[Teacher Name]** from **[School Name]**. I'm calling to introduce myself and say how excited I am to work with your child this year.

I'd love to learn a little more about your child from your perspective. What are some of their strengths, interests, or things that help them feel successful at school?

I also want you to know that I value communication and partnership. Please feel comfortable reaching out anytime to me by [Provide phone number/messaging app/email] or send a note with questions, concerns, or updates you'd like to share, or to request a meeting with me.

Thank you for your time today. I'm looking forward to working together this year!

Family Communication Log

Date:

Family Contacted:

Method:

☐ Phone ☐ Email ☐ Messaging/Text ☐ Meeting

Follow-up Needed?:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Weekly Family Update Template:

Hello Families,

Here are a few highlights from this week:

Classroom highlights:

Student success:

Upcoming events/reminders:

Ways to support learning at home:

Positive Message Templates



Hi **[add parent/caregiver title and name]**! I wanted to share that your child worked really hard today and showed great effort during class activities. I'm proud of their progress and wanted to celebrate that success with you!



Hello **[add parent/caregiver title and name]**! Just a quick update. Your child had a great day participating in group discussions and supporting classmates. Thank you for your continued partnership!



Good afternoon **[add parent/caregiver title and name]**! I wanted to let you know your child demonstrated excellent problem-solving skills today. We're seeing wonderful growth! Please feel free to reach out with questions or updates you would like to share. Thank you for your partnership!

Building Trust During Challenging Discussions

Before the Conversation

1. Prepare intentionally
2. Gather relevant information and examples
3. Focus on solutions, not blame
4. Consider the family's perspective and emotions
5. Use plain, clear and respectful language



During the Conversation

1. Begin with positive observations about the student.

Example: “Your child is incredibly creative and works hard during small group activities.”

2. Use collaborative language

Instead of: “You need to...” **Try:** “Let’s work together to...”

“What strategies have worked well at home?”

“How can we support your child together?”

3. Listen actively

Pause and allow families time to respond

Acknowledge emotions without defensiveness

Validate concerns and experiences.

Examples: “I hear your concern.” “Thank you for sharing that perspective.” “That sounds frustrating.”

Ask clarifying questions.

After the Conversation

1. Follow up
2. Summarize next steps clearly
3. Provide written follow-up if needed
4. Continue positive communication afterward
5. Check in regularly to rebuild trust and connection

Remember: Conflict does not damage relationships. Lack of communication and trust does.

PRACTICE REFLECTION

Family Engagement Self-Assessment Checklist

Communication Practices	Consistently	Sometimes	Needs Growth
I communicate with families clearly and respectfully	☐	☐	☐
I share positive updates, not just concerns	☐	☐	☐
I use clear, family-friendly language	☐	☐	☐
I respond to families in a timely manner	☐	☐	☐
Family Partnership Practices	Consistently	Sometimes	Needs Growth
I invite parent voice early in meetings and regularly	☐	☐	☐
I acknowledge families as experts on their child	☐	☐	☐
I create welcoming meeting environments	☐	☐	☐
I actively seek family input	☐	☐	☐
I encourage shared decision-making	☐	☐	☐
Cultural Responsiveness Practices	Consistently	Sometimes	Needs Growth
I consider cultural perspectives and experiences	☐	☐	☐
I provide language supports when needed	☐	☐	☐
I avoid assumptions about families	☐	☐	☐
I demonstrate empathy during conversations	☐	☐	☐
I build relationship before addressing concerns	☐	☐	☐

Family Engagement Practices Reflection

Reflection Questions

1. What is one strength in my current family engagement practices?

2. What is one area where I would like to grow?

3. What is one action I can implement immediately to strengthen family partnership?

Remember: Strong family engagement is built through:

1. Trust

2. Consistency

3. Empathy

4. Accessibility

5. Shared partnership, etc.

Small, intentional actions can create lasting positive relationships with families and improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Positioning Family-as-Host (FAH)

IN THE FAH MODEL...

Families are the “Host”

Parents and caregivers are:

- Active participants in the learning process
- Experts on their child’s strengths and needs
- Essential decision-making partners
- Primary initiators of collaboration and communication

Educators and providers are the “Guest”

Educators and service providers serve as:

- Facilitators of partnership
- Supportive collaborators
- Listeners and guides
- Partners who create welcoming and inclusive environments

Why this matters?

Strong family partnerships help:

- Improve student outcomes
- Build trust between families and schools
- Reduce misunderstandings during IEP meetings
- Increase consistency between home and school
- Ensure families feel informed, respected, and valued

What educators and providers can do:

- Listen first
- Invite parent voice early
- Use clear and accessible language
- Build relationships before concerns arise
- Approach conversations with empathy and flexibility

Reflection Question

How do my actions communicate that families are equal partners in the IEP process?

Proactive Communication with Families

Why effective communication matters	Early and consistent communication helps:	
	Prevent misunderstandings	
	Build trust before challenges arise	
	Keep families informed about student progress	
	Strengthen collaboration between home and school	
Effective Communication Strategies	Positive communication helps establish trust and openness.	
	Begin conversations with positive observations about the student. Examples: “Your child showed great persistence today.” “I noticed how kind and helpful they were during group work.”	
Keep Families Informed Regularly	Small updates can make a big difference.	
	Possible tools include messaging apps, emails, text updates or brief phone calls	
	Photos of classroom activities	
	Communication notebooks	
	Weekly progress summaries	
Communicate Early	Address concerns before formal meetings whenever possible.	
	Helpful practices:	Share observations early
		Clarify misunderstandings quickly
		Discuss interventions and support proactively
		Avoid waiting until IEP meetings to raise concerns
Communication Tips	DO	Use clear, family-friendly language
		Be respectful and empathetic
		Invite family feedback
		Respond promptly when possible
	AVOID	Educational jargon without explanation
		Contacting families only when problems occur
		Making assumptions about family involvement

Flexible Engagement Approaches

Recognizing Participation Barriers	Families may experience:
	Work schedule conflicts
	Transportation challenges
	Childcare responsibilities
	Language barriers
	Technology limitations
	Previous negative school experiences
Offer Multiple Meeting Options	Early morning meetings
	Evening calls
	Virtual participation
	Hybrid meetings
	Written summaries when attendance is difficult
Provide Additional Supports	Helpful supports may include:
	School-home liaisons
	Interpreters or translators
	Reminder calls or messages/texts
	Childcare support when available
Remember: Flexibility communicates respect for families' time, responsibilities, and lived experiences.	

Family-Friendly Meeting Practices



Before Meetings	Share agendas ahead of time
	Explain meeting goals clearly
	Ask families about preferred communication methods
During Meetings	Pause regularly for questions
	Check for understanding
	Use visuals and examples when possible
After Meetings	Provide clear summaries
	Review next steps
	Follow up with additional support if needed

Remember:

Flexibility communicates respect for families' time, responsibilities, and lived experiences.

Making IEP Meetings More Accessible

Why Accessibility Matters	IEP meetings can feel overwhelming because of:	
	Complex terminology	However, educators can create more inclusive experiences through intentional practices.
	Unfamiliar procedures	
	Emotional stress; Large meeting teams	
Strategies for Accessible Meetings	Use clear language	
	Instead of: “Your child demonstrates deficits in expressive language.”	
	Try: “Your child has difficulty expressing ideas clearly during conversations.”	
Explain the Process	Families benefit from understanding:	
	The purpose of the meeting	
	Who is present and why	
	What decisions will be discussed	
	Weekly progress summaries	
Ask Open-Ended Questions	Encourage participation with questions like:	
	“What questions do you have?”	
	“What goals do you have for your child?”	
	“What strategies work well at home?”	
	“What would you like us to understand about your child?”	
Create a Welcoming Environment	Helpful practices:	
	Warm introductions	
	Collaborative seating arrangements	
	Eye contact and active listening	
	Avoiding side conversations among staff	
Remember: Parents are equal members of the IEP team.		

Centering Parent Voice

Parents Are Experts on Their Child	Families understand their Child's:	
	Strengths	
	Interests and motivations	
	Learning preferences	
	Personality and behavior	
	Cultural values and experiences	
Start with Family Perspective by Asking:	“Tell us about your child.”	
	“What makes your child shine?”	
	“What are your hopes for this year?”	
Acknowledge Parent Expertise by Saying:	“You know your child best.”	
	“Your insight is important.”	
	“Thank you for sharing your perspective.”	
Invite Participation Throughout the Meeting	Instead of waiting until the end:	
	Pause for discussion regularly	
	Check in throughout each agenda section	
	Validate family observations	
	Encourage collaborative problem-solving	
Create a Welcoming Environment	The environment influences comfort and participation.	
	Helpful practices:	Sit in a circle or collaborative arrangement
		Introduce team members clearly
		Use warm and respectful language
		Avoid rushed conversations
Reflection Question: How do my meeting practices communicate partnership and respect?		

Cultural Awareness and Responsiveness Matter

Why Cultural Awareness Matters

Families may have different cultures and these differences can influence participation in special education processes.

Consider:

Perspectives on disability
Communication styles
Experiences with schools
Decision-making traditions
Expectations around education and support

Responsive Practice Builds Trust

Slow Down Conversations

Allow time for processing
Pause for questions
Avoid rushing important decisions

Listen with Empathy

Acknowledge emotions and concerns
Validate family experiences
Focus on understanding before responding

Use a Strength-Based Approach

Focus on:
Student strengths and growth
Family resilience and knowledge
Collaborative solutions
Examples: “Your child is creative and curious.” “You’ve built strong routines that support learning at home.”

Cultural Awareness Practice Reflection

Reflection Questions

1. Have I made assumptions about this family?

2. Am I honoring family communication preferences?

3. Have I provided language supports when needed?

4. Am I creating space for multiple perspectives?

Key Takeaway

Empathy, cultural responsiveness, and intentional listening strengthen family partnerships and improve student outcomes.

Family Engagement Do's and Don'ts



Do's



Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Begin conversations with strengths.	Lead with deficits.
Use clear and accessible language.	Take over IEP discussions.
Invite parent voice early and often.	Rush meetings or conversations.
Offer flexible meeting options.	Wait until problems escalate to communicate.
Listen actively and empathetically.	Overwhelm with technical language.
Respect diverse perspectives.	Assume lack of participation means lack of care.
Build trust consistently over time.	
Ask open-ended questions.	Dismiss parent emotions or concerns.
Follow up after meetings.	Use excessive educational jargon.

Action Planning Worksheet

Communication

What is one way I can improve communication with families?

Accessibility

What can I do to make meetings more welcoming and accessible?

Parent Voice

How can I better center family perspectives during meetings?

Cultural Responsiveness

What is one step I can take to strengthen culturally responsive practices?

Personal Commitment

One action I will implement immediately:

Remember:

Family engagement is not an additional task. It is an essential component of equitable and effective special education practice.

Home-School-Community Partnership



Why Home-School-Community Partnership Matters

Families are partners and leaders in the learning process. They are not just participants.

Families, educators, and community providers learn together.

Educators and community providers honor family values and experiences.

Everyone brings valuable knowledge and expertise.

Different Roles, Same Goals

Families

Share lived experiences

Guide understanding of student needs

Educators

Apply strategies in learning and practice

Build trusting relationships

Community Providers

Provide resources and support

Try One or More Tomorrow!

Build Relationships First	Connect before discussing concerns.
Invite Families as Co-Experts	Say: "You know your child best."
	Ask: "What should we understand?"
Start with Strengths	Ask: "What is your child doing well right now?"
Use Plain Language	Avoid jargon. Explain terms like IEP, accommodations, and types of services clearly.
Follow Up Consistently	Send a quick message after meetings summarizing key points.

Conversation Starters Questions

During Meetings, Ask...	"Can you tell me about your child's strengths and interests?"
	"What are your hopes for your child this year?"
During Meetings, Listen...	"What has been working well at home?"
	"What concerns would you like us to focus on?"
	"Does this plan reflect your priorities?"
Difficult Conversations	"I appreciate you reaching out for help."
	"I want to understand your perspective. Can you share more?"
	"Let's work together to find a solution that supports you and your child."
Follow-Up, Re-invite	"What questions do you have?"
	"How can we continue to support your family?"

Family-As-Host Six Stages at a Glance

1	Problem Identification and Help Seeking A concern is identified and help is sought.
2	Intake Process and Referral Presenting concerns are gathered and invitation to assist is extended.
3	Assessment and Evaluation Information is gathered to understand needs and strengths.
4	Eligibility and Intervention Plan is created, and skills and expertise are drawn upon to provide needed support.
5	Acceptance of Recommendations Family accepts school and service recommendations and meets their child's learning and care goals.
6	Learning Outcome School and service providers join the family in celebrating the student's growth and accomplishments.

Re-Empowering Parents and Caregivers

Remind Parents of...

Questions They Can Ask

What are my child's strengths?

What goals are we working toward?

How will progress be measured?

How can I support learning at home?

Before the IEP Meeting

Ask for reports in advance.

Write down your questions.

Bring a support person if desired.

Remind Parents that...

They know their child best. Their voice matters.

The Six Ps to Inclusive Practice

1. Person	Changing attitudes and feelings about students with disabilities and their families. Example: I will recognize that my feelings, attitude, and beliefs regarding disability and special education services may differ from those of the families seeking school or community services.
2. Practice	Adjusting engagement styles to meet each family's unique needs. Example: I will use active and reflective listening to ensure families feel heard, and that their opinions are valued and respected during initial contact and throughout the service process.
3. Program	Providing information and activities that respond to families' unique needs. Example: I will ensure that information documents shared with families are easily accessible to them and in clear language.
4. Place	Creating IEP meeting spaces and school environments that support family engagement. Example: I will create a warm and welcoming space that allows families to feel comfortable sharing and learning during meetings.
5. Policy	Adhering to regulations, laws, and mandates on special education and family engagement. Example: I will follow guidelines, laws, and mandates when responding to families' requests for special education and other services.
6. Philosophy	Upholding school system values and beliefs about educational equity. Example: I will apply engagement principles that are strength-based and family- and student-centered when working with families (Ofonedu, M.E. 2023).

FAH Training 10 Key Takeaways

1

Relationships come before recommendations.

2

Families are experts on their children.

3

Engagement is a partnership, not a checklist.

4

Family voice should guide decision-making.

5

Culture shapes communication and trust.

6

Listening is more powerful than telling.

7

Use clear, plain, and accessible language.

8

Collaboration improves outcomes.

9

Small actions build strong relationships.

10

Reflect regularly on your practice.