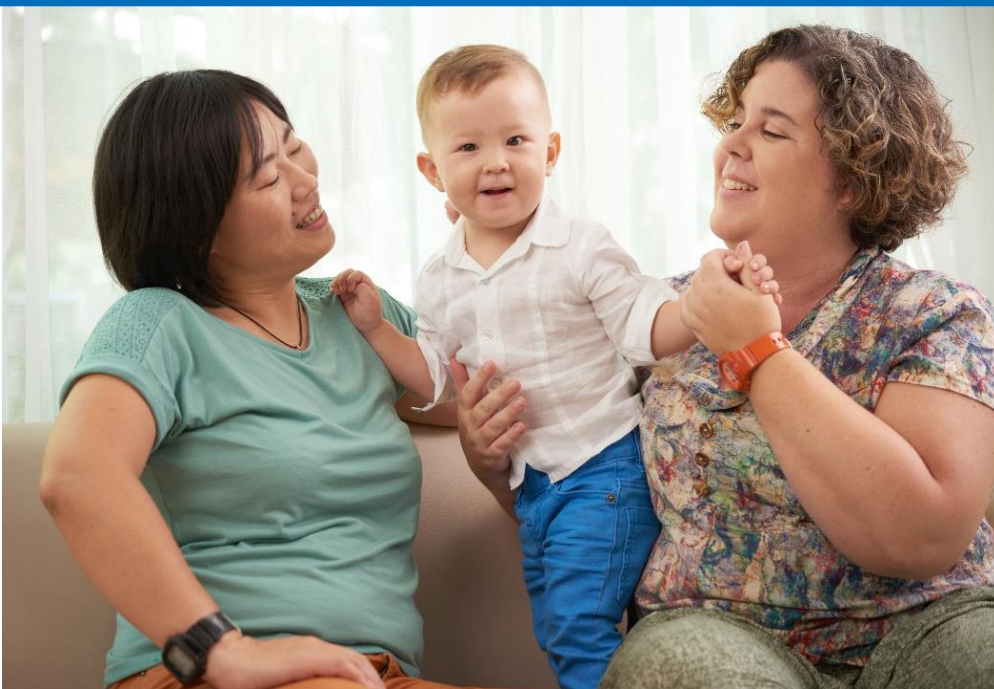


# Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Family Partnerships

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



A companion resource in support of the Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten

Produced by the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start

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## Introduction and Overview

In late 2022, the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Great Start (MDE OGS) released the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten* (ECSQ B-K), which defines children’s growth and development as a continuous progression beginning at birth and establishes a framework of expectations for high-quality early care and education programs and settings to support children’s learning and development.

The development of this resource focused on clearly identifying the essential qualities of high-quality family partnerships for early care and education programs and settings, which are not specific to any particular program, setting, curriculum, or instructional approach. This resource is an early childhood-specific companion to *MiFamily: Michigan’s Family Engagement Framework*.

## Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Family Partnerships

As outlined in *MiFamily: Michigan’s Family Engagement Framework* (2020), family engagement is “a collaborative relationship between families, educators, providers and partners to support and improve the learning, development, and health of every learner” (Michigan Department of Education, p. 1).

Developing a strong partnership with each family is “central...to children’s healthy development and wellness” (Office of Early Childhood Development, 2020). This is an intentional and ongoing practice, beginning the moment a family contacts the program and building through each interaction between a family member and staff throughout the child’s time with the program. The foundation for these Elements is a strengths-based approach, with the belief that:

- Every family has unique strengths,
- Families are their children’s first and most important teachers,
- Families are our partners, making daily choices that affect their children’s learning and development,
- Families understand their children and can share valuable information, and
- Families’ suggestions and requests help us meet their children’s needs (Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2020, p. 5).

This document identifies and articulates the characteristics of five Key Elements fundamental to building high-quality family partnerships and strong outcomes for young children, based on the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten*: relationships, partnerships, participation, intentional inclusion, and a welcoming environment.

The Elements are not unique to any one type of setting, specific program, or curriculum, but apply in center-based and home-based programs, with mixed age and age-specific groups of children ages birth to 3, in part-day or full-day programs. Each Element is defined and described through bullets that detail hallmarks of the Element providing guidance for staff working with children as well as those supporting, administering, or evaluating a program.

The Elements draw from national and state standards for early childhood and are based on research in child development that exemplifies proven practices in early education. In particular, these Key Elements are aligned to the Michigan *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten* (ECSQ B-K), *MiFamily: Michigan’s Family Engagement Framework*, and the *National Association for the Education and Young Children (NAEYC) Program Quality Standards*. A bibliography is provided at the end of this document listing additional sources supporting these Key Elements.

In this document, the terms “family” and “parent” may be used; these terms refer to all adult caregivers involved in the child’s life, including but not limited to parents (both biological and non-biological), stepparents, foster parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc.

## Key Element #1 Relationships

The program supports relationships as the cornerstone of family partnerships.

Intentionally develop relationships with families by:

- Ensuring new and continuing families can build a foundation for a strong relationship with their child's teacher or caregiver. For example:
  - Offer one-on-one time or home visits for teachers to meet with new parents.
  - Use phone calls, emails, or "Tell me about your child" packets to gather information about children's interests, the family's goals for their child, and the family's cultural values.
- Consistently engaging families in open and ongoing two-way communication about children's daily lives, social and independent experiences, and developmental progress. For example:
  - Send daily notes, text messages, or emails with individualized updates.
  - Take a moment for daily greetings and conversations during drop-off or pick-up.
  - Actively ask families about children's interests, needs, and daily life.
  - Take time to ask about and listen to parents' needs, concerns, or desires for their children.
- Whenever possible, scheduling the same staff member to greet the family during pick-up and drop-off. Otherwise, ensuring that any information from drop-off is available to daily caregivers, and that all information is available to share with families at pick-up.



- Working with families to identify a plan for communication during the day. For example:
  - Who to contact if the child becomes ill.
  - Ideal times and contact methods for critical but non-urgent issues.
  - Upon request, contact the parent during the day, such as when a child has a difficult time settling in, and the parent asks to be emailed when the child settles in.
  - Arrange to meet with the family one-on-one if they have a concern about their child or the program.
- Sharing positive experiences or outcomes with the parent. This could be as simple as "Ana was kind to a friend in class who fell down. She helped the other child back up."
- Approaching every family authentically, with the intention of learning about the family's interests, passions, goals, and strengths.



## Key Element #2 Partnerships

Within the program, families are engaged and supported partners in their child's education.

**Communicate** with families to understand their needs and preferences.

- Use a variety of methods to communicate with families, such as sharing information during drop-off or pick-up times, through communication apps, phone calls, notes, daily logs, and emails.
- Find out what methods of informal daily communication work best for each family and use these whenever possible.
- Ensure families know where to go to ask questions about something specific, such as payment questions, learning questions, health questions.
- Schedule formal communication regularly, with families' schedules in mind, such as:
  - Family-teacher conferences
  - Monthly newsletters
  - Child-led conferences
  - Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings
- Communicate with families in their home or preferred language whenever possible.
- Share updates and information about children's daily experiences and development.

**Collaborate** with families to make decisions and **identify goals** for children's growth and development.

- Regularly take time with the family to ask about the child's interests and the family's goals for their child, and to discuss how to best meet the individual needs of their child. This may be as simple as asking "What experiences are you hoping your child has this year?" or "Do you have any specific goals for your child?"
- Arrange to meet with the family one-on-one if they have a concern about their child or the program, listen with intentional sensitivity, and work together with the family to move forward.

Recognize opportunities to **connect families with program or community resources**.

- Provide information about opportunities to participate in early childhood organizations such as Great Start Parent Coalitions, Michigan Alliance for Families, and local community foundations and events.
- Compile an accessible list of community resources to share with families and to include in your newsletter, such as local food banks, clothing closets, parenting support, housing information, educational or job opportunities, developmental screenings, or kindergarten sign-ups.
- Use care and sensitivity when connecting families with wellness and stability resources.
- Offer resources to families, such as a lending library, sharing child-friendly recipes, or hosting parent education meetings and events.



## Key Element #3 Participation

The program's family engagement efforts include intentional inclusion of families in program improvement processes.

To ensure family participation in program improvement efforts:

- As part of annual program evaluations, use family surveys and other methods (ideally in families' preferred or home languages) to include information about families' wants, needs, and experiences—and communicate the results.
- Request feedback from families at parent meetings.
- Use exit interviews or exit surveys to understand why families choose to leave the program.
- Invite families to participate in a family advisory committee.
- Intentionally incorporate family feedback in decisions about program improvement goals.



Invite families to **share feedback** throughout the day and year by:

- Communicating an “open-door” policy with classroom staff and leadership, so parents understand they may escalate concerns or feedback as needed.
- Approaching conversations related to feedback and suggestions with openness and a goal of understanding. Defensiveness when receiving feedback blocks trust in relationships.
- When feedback or suggestions are incorporated into the program, communicating these changes or updates back to the family.

Encourage families to provide feedback and suggestions specifically focused on the program's **family engagement efforts**.

- Document informal verbal communication, send out surveys, and/or collect comment cards.
- Consider anonymous feedback methods for those who don't want to be identified.
- Invite suggestions for content and topics of interest for family engagement opportunities.
- Invite families to help plan family engagement activities.

## Key Element #4

### Intentional Inclusion

Within the program, family engagement efforts are tailored to address all families.

Increase **accessibility**.

- Provide program resources, and written and verbal communications in the family's preferred language whenever possible.
- Hold family engagement events at times and days that are convenient for the families.
- Consider childcare options when planning adult-only family events, such as parent-teacher conferences or parent education meetings.
- Be sensitive to families' socio-economic differences when asking for contributions.
- Focus on the interests of the families when planning family engagement events.

Take **family differences** into account.

- Consider the differences in families' work schedules when developing drop-off and pick-up policies and procedures.
- Invite families to share information about themselves so the program can better meet their needs.
- Use information about families' religious, cultural, and other differences when creating policies and procedures around mealtimes and toilet-learning.
- Invite families to share feedback about family engagement and communication efforts—and use this information to make improvements.

**Support program staff** in meeting families' needs.

- Provide professional learning focused on developing family partnerships, effective communication strategies, implicit bias, and inclusive practices.
- Support staff in learning key words and phrases in families' home languages.
- Identify each family's preferred method of communication to make participation as convenient as possible—and support program staff in using those communication methods, such as email accounts, time to make phone calls, or making copies of handwritten notes for two-household families.

## Key Element #5

### Welcoming Environment

A positive learning environment contributes to family engagement within the program.

Intentionally create a **positive, welcoming environment** by:

- Structuring drop-off and pick-up transitions to meet children's and families' needs.
- Posting welcoming entrance and directional signs in highly visible areas.
- Communicating an "open-door" policy that allows families to spend time with their children in the learning environment, and following through by inviting families to participate in activities during drop-off or pick-up times.
- Encouraging families to share their culture and traditions, games, or favorite children's books with the group.
- Inviting families to participate in and/or help prepare for program activities and events, such as story time, field trips, parties, and daily routines.
- Designing a welcoming space for families to connect with their child or other families. For example, reading nook in the lobby, or a seating area outside a classroom that families are encouraged to use.
- Hosting multigenerational or whole-family events, such as a Grandparents' Day party or a weekend Ice Cream Social.





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