

Foundations for Quality Series

Consumer Engagement



Orientation for Early Childhood and School-age Care & Education Professionals



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Acknowledgments

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
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NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Consumer Engagement: Orientation for Early Childhood and School-age Care & Education Professionals

Introduction

State, Territory, and Tribal administrators and other individuals in early childhood and school-age care and education systems, including those working in child care resource and referral, early care, school-age, and comprehensive family support programs are uniquely positioned to promote children’s health, development, and learning by engaging parents and families through consumer education.

The Preamble to the 2016 CCDF Final Rule recognizes this important opportunity and links consumer education to family engagement and child outcomes: *“Effective consumer education strategies are important to inform parental choice of child care and to engage parents in the development of their children...”*

This resource introduces a vision for engaging families as consumers of early childhood and school-age care and education services and explains how this vision relates to consumer education and family engagement. State, Territory, and Tribal administrators and other early childhood and school-age care and education professionals, including agencies responsible for consumer education, can use this information to make their systems more responsive to parents and families.

“Professionals” and “Programs”

In this resource, professional refers to all early childhood and school-age care and education professionals working at the systems or program level.

Program refers to all early childhood and school-age care and education programs.

What We Know About Parental Child Care Decision-Making

Some of the most important decisions that families make are about early childhood and school-age care and education services for their children. Research tells us that parents want, first and foremost, programs that are **safe, nurturing, and educational** (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2011). Beyond these basic criteria, when parents describe what quality means to them, they refer to provider education, training, child-adult ratios, activities to support child development, and open communication between providers and families (Forry, Tout, Rothenberg, & Vesely, 2013).



Parents consistently express that these indicators of quality are their primary concerns in choosing early childhood and school-age care and education services. Cost follows closely as a top priority (National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2010). Because of cost and other practical concerns, such as long treks between home, work, and programs, and program schedules that don't match parent work hours, preferences for quality are not always reflected in the decisions parents make when choosing a program for their children.

There are a wide range of early childhood and school-age care and education program options that vary in structure, cost, provider characteristics, and quality. To make the best choice for their family, parents need to be aware of all of the program options available to them. Consumer education is important to ensuring that parents know about and can find programs to meet their needs.

On average, families with low incomes use lower-quality arrangements (Forry, 2012), in part because they experience a variety of constraints. As a result, the options they do find may not always be the best match for a family's needs (Office of Research, Planning and Evaluation, 2010). For example, due to cost, high-quality options may simply not be within their reach (Office of Research, Planning and Evaluation, 2011).

Parents describe indicators of quality as:

- provider education and training,
- child-adult ratios,
- activities to support child development, and
- open communication between providers and families.

(Forry, Tout, Rothenberg, & Vesely, 2013)

Time can be a constraint, especially in situations where policies inadvertently put parents in the position of having to make a selection quickly. For example, a parent using Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) often must meet job training or employment requirements within a few days of notification of benefits. Parents may risk losing child care subsidy benefits or even their job if their child care arrangements are interrupted and replacement arrangements are not found quickly (Office of Research, Planning and Evaluation, 2011). As a result, many parents choose a program hurriedly and consider few options. One study shows that 41 percent of families with low incomes made their choice for child care within one day (Forry, 2012).

In addition to financial, practical, and time constraints, the gap between what parents want and what they ultimately choose is widened by the fact that many parents do not understand the differences among the various types of early childhood and school-age care and education settings. They assume that all programs are inspected and that all caregivers are trained to work with children (National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2010). Consumer education and consumer engagement can help close that knowledge gap.

Parents want to understand the differences among the types of early care and education settings.

Building a Shared Understanding of Our Terms

Professionals can enhance ways of collaborating with one another in systems and programs by developing a common understanding of the terminology used in day-to-day operations and practices. You may find these terms and definitions useful when addressing the consumer education and engagement activities typically performed by States, Territories, Tribes, child care resource and referral agencies, and others responsible for consumer education.

Consumer comes from language in the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) of 2014 and the 2016 Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Final Rule. Most often, the term refers to families who are seeking information about early childhood or school-age care and education for their children. When parents and families are engaged as consumers of early childhood and school-age services, they act as:

- **Decision makers** who are equipped with information and seek access to quality early childhood and school-age care and education for their children
- **Resourceful users** of information and early childhood, school-age, and comprehensive services that support child and family well-being throughout early childhood and beyond
- **Trusted peers** who help their friends and families understand and connect with the highest quality options available
- **Leaders** who advance program quality through leadership efforts in their child's program and their community

Outreach tends to focus on increasing awareness of available services and promoting their use. Professionals do this by intentionally seeking out families and ensuring inclusion of all families. One aspect of effective outreach involves collecting and analyzing data to deliberately identify families who are not being reached so that relevant information can be shared. Another involves conducting culturally and linguistically responsive promotional activities to raise awareness of high-quality early childhood and school-age care and education services, comprehensive supports for family well-being, and research-based practices to support child development and learning.



Examples of outreach:

- A family learns about summer nutrition programs and summer school-age care and education programs by reading a flyer they received from a subsidy eligibility office.
- A child care center participates in a community resource fair. Center staff share information with families about the importance of high quality early childhood care and education. Staff also share tips for identifying a quality program. Information is shared in languages spoken by families and in ways that help families feel welcome, valued, and respected.
- A child care resource and referral agency works with community partners to review local data about enrollment in programs. Together they create a plan to increase awareness of the importance of high-quality early childhood care and education and the availability of financial assistance among groups of families who are underrepresented in the data, for example, families experiencing homelessness.
- A State sponsors a media campaign (in multiple languages) designed to inform families entering the subsidy system about the State's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

Consumer education refers to providing information to help parents build on their knowledge and understanding of

- quality and options in early childhood and school-age care and education programs;
- child development, developmental screenings, services for children with disabilities, and prevention of suspensions and expulsions;
- CCDF subsidies and other financial assistance families can use to help pay for early childhood and school-age care and education;
- policies, procedures, and regulations, for example, licensing, monitoring, and background checks; and

- comprehensive (health, human, and economic support) services to support family well-being.

Effective consumer education information is

- designed to help parents make informed decisions about early childhood and school-age care and education, and comprehensive supports for family well-being;
- tailored to match parents' interests and preferences;
- culturally and linguistically responsive;
- based on data and research representative of children and families you are working with; and
- reflective of exemplary practices to support child development and learning.



Consumer education tends to focus on the one-way communication of information to parents. At the same time, professionals recognize education as a shared experience that involves both giving and receiving information.

The following are examples of consumer education activities:

- A father learns about requirements for health, safety, and learning in licensed programs by visiting a consumer education website.
- A family child care provider shares information with enrolled families about developmental screenings and local agencies that offer them.
- Subsidy eligibility staff provide information about different types of programs, how they are regulated, and the State's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) to families applying for financial assistance.
- A State agency sends families participating in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) an email that provides information about CCDF child care subsidy and tips for choosing a high-quality program.

The CCDBG Act and CCDF Final Rule put forth a number of requirements for States, Territories, and Tribes to provide consumer education. These requirements ensure that States make information about certain topics available to families. Learn more by reviewing CCDF Frequently Asked Questions at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/ccdf-final-rule-faq>.

Consumer engagement goes beyond making information available to families. Consumer engagement relies on two-way, relationship-based interactions between families and professionals. They share information with one another and work together to build each other's knowledge and capacities.

As families expand their knowledge and leadership capacities they can become more effective in finding and applying research-based information, for example, to inform their choices about a program for their child, monitor their child's experiences in a program, or use their voices to advocate for higher quality and equitable access to services. As professionals expand their knowledge and capacities, they can become more effective in inviting and responding to families' interests and values, and supporting and partnering with families and other stakeholders.

Consumer engagement activities might include:

- After learning more about health and safety requirements for licensed programs, a mother chooses a licensed program for her child. She also shares information about licensed programs with friends who are looking for someone to help care for their children.
- Families and professionals come together to campaign for increased funding in support of high-quality early care and education in their community.
- A child care resource and referral agency hosts a town hall meeting. Parents participate and talk with policy makers about their challenges and experiences in finding and paying for high quality programs.
- A State agency convenes a parent focus group (representative of the races, ethnicities, cultures and languages of families they work with) and asks parents to provide feedback about the agency's consumer education website. When changes to the website are complete, the agency reconnects with the parents to see if the changes improved the website's usefulness.

What Is the Difference Between Education and Engagement?

Consumer education equips parents with information they can use to make informed decisions about a program for their child and other family support services.

Consumer engagement refers to two-way, mutually respectful interactions in which families and professionals work together to find, share, and use information in support of families' well-being and children's health, development, and learning.

Consumer engagement focuses on partnerships with parents and is distinguished by the two-way exchanges of information as families and professionals work together.

How Consumer Education and Consumer Engagement are Alike

Strengths-based attitudes are key to both consumer education and consumer engagement.

Examples include:

- All children and families have strengths.
- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children. Families are the one constant in children's lives, and children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.

- Families are our partners with a critical role in their family’s development. Families make choices every day that affect a child’s development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identity.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family. Families understand their children best and can make decisions for their children’s well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- Families’ contributions are important and valuable. Being open to their suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child.



Both consumer education and consumer engagement overlap in intent and align with the purposes of the CCDBG and CCDF Final Rule:

- **Promoting** parental choice
- **Helping** parents make informed decisions about services
- **promoting** parent involvement and family engagement
- **Improving** the overall quality of early childhood and school-age care and education by implementing health, safety, licensing, training, and oversight standards and building family knowledge about these standards
- **Increasing** participation in high quality programs for children from families with low-incomes
- **Promoting** coordination of high-quality services to maximize parents’ options and build upward family economic mobility

Both consumer education and consumer engagement have positive effects on quality.

Consumer education and consumer engagement *indicate* and *drive* program quality. Effective consumer education and engagement indicate a professional’s belief in the importance of families’ access, interests, knowledge and feedback about program and services.

Consumer education and engagement drive quality when equipped, informed and engaged families influence and improve early childhood and school-age care and education settings.

The following are examples of how consumer education and engagement influence program quality:

- Consumer education is an indicator of quality when professionals provide relevant information about child development and early childhood, school-age, comprehensive services to families.

- Consumer education drives quality when families rely on their State’s QRIS ratings to choose programs for their children.
- Consumer engagement is an indicator of quality when a family child care provider has a policy in place in which she seeks targeted requests for family feedback three times per year.
- Consumer engagement is both an indicator and a driver of quality when families and professionals engage in two-way conversations about monitoring results and work together on corrective actions that lead to better quality.



Consumer education and consumer engagement can set the stage for and promote parent involvement and family engagement.

Parent involvement occurs when parents participate in activities and take advantage of opportunities in their child’s program. Professionals and programs typically initiate parent involvement. These activities are important and often beneficial to families. Parent involvement examples include:

- Parents attend meetings or special events a program offers.
- An early childhood professional sends home tips on how parents can help support developmental goals that the program sees as important for their child.

Parent involvement is characterized by early childhood and school-age care and education professionals designing and leading activities for parents.

Family engagement is the process we use to build positive goal-oriented relationships with families. It is mutually respectful, responsive to families’ cultures and languages, and includes genuine efforts to understand each family’s beliefs, values, and priorities. Effective family engagement involves parents and professionals working together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children. Family engagement also contributes to better outcomes for the whole family. At the program level, family engagement occurs through positive, goal-oriented relationships as parents and professionals work together toward the goals that families choose for themselves and their children.

“Parent” and “Family”

We use the words parent and family to honor all adult caregivers who make a difference in a child’s life.

Parents refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents.

Families can be biological or non-biological, chosen or circumstantial. They are connected through culture, language, tradition, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.

Through family engagement, professionals partner with families to design program structures and carry out program activities together.

In this approach, professionals and families share responsibility for children’s care and learning. For example, program staff and parents plan ways, together, to support a child—a team approach that includes everyone at home and in the program. There are agreed upon plans to check in, revisit plans, and meet when new ideas are needed.

At the systems levels, professionals partner with parent leaders and programs to promote family well-being, positive parent-child relationships, and ongoing learning and development for professionals and families. Professionals work together with parents and community partners to ensure equity, inclusiveness, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

Engagement in a child’s early years prepares families to be engaged throughout their child’s school years.

Most importantly, family engagement efforts support the parent-child relationships that are key to a child’s healthy development, school readiness, and well-being—now, and in the future.

Examples of family engagement:

- Families and staff work together to create activities that reflect the cultural traditions of the families in the program.
- Families work with professionals by participating in the design of program policies, activities, materials, and professional development.

What Is Family Engagement?

Family engagement is an interactive process through which professionals, family members, and their children build positive, goal-oriented relationships in support of child and family outcomes.

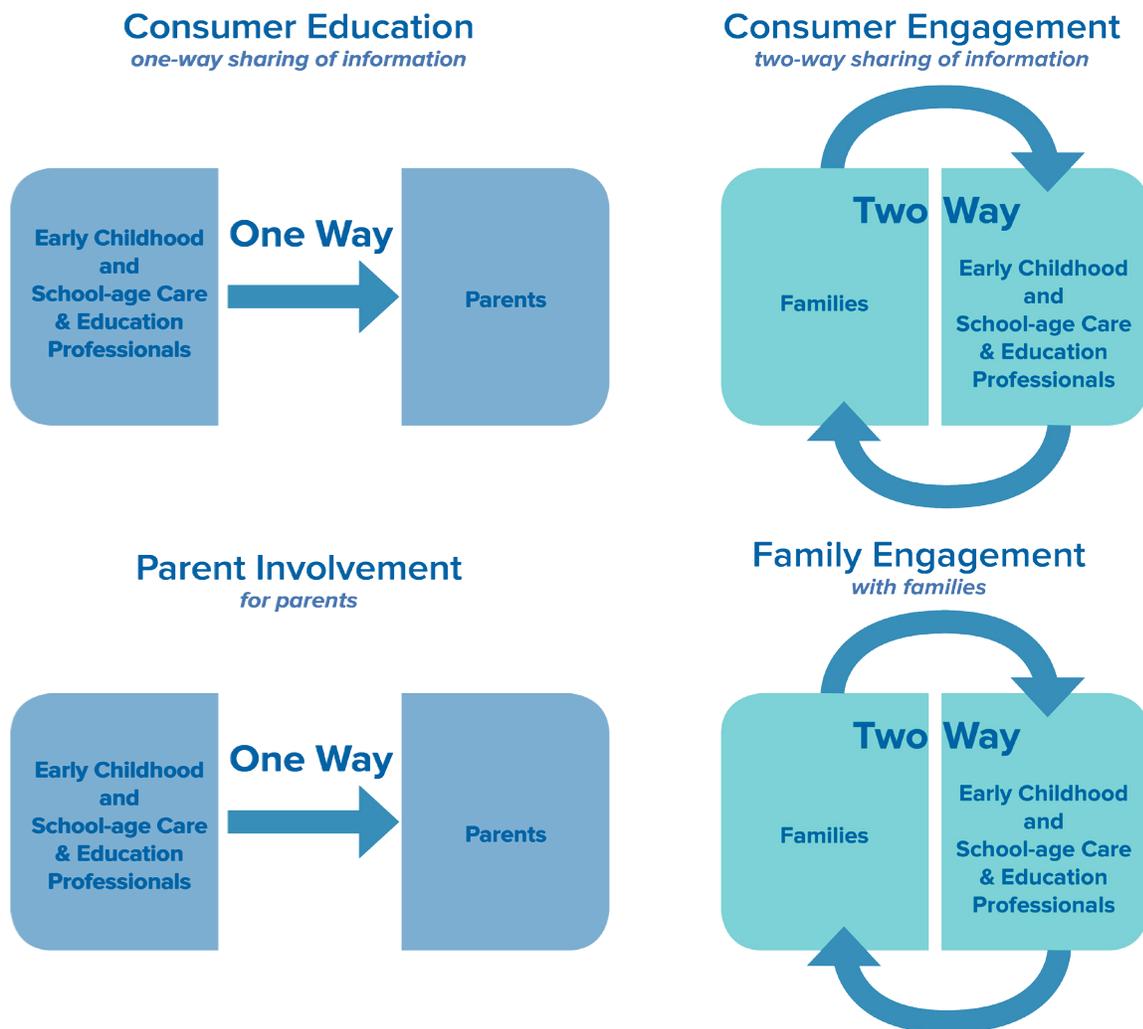
Understanding How These Concepts Work Together

There are clear parallels between consumer engagement and family engagement, but they are not the same. One way to think about the differences is to examine the intended outcomes for each. Consider how they support, but are different from one another. Consumer engagement is about partnering with parents to improve and support parental choice. Family engagement is about partnering with families in support of positive child and family outcomes.

Consumer Engagement Outcomes	Family Engagement Outcomes*
<p>Families as decision makers who are equipped with information and seek access to quality early childhood and school-age care and education for their children</p> <p>Families as resourceful users of information and early childhood, school-age, and comprehensive services that support child and family well-being throughout early childhood and beyond</p> <p>Families as trusted peers who help their friends and families understand and connect with the highest quality options available</p> <p>Families as leaders who advance program quality through leadership efforts in their child's program and their community</p>	<p>Family Well-being</p> <p>Positive Parent-Child Relationships</p> <p>Families as Lifelong Educators</p> <p>Families as Learners</p> <p>Family Engagement in Transitions</p> <p>Family Connections to Peers and Community</p> <p>Families as Advocates</p>
<p>*Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework for Early Childhood Systems.</p>	



The graphic shown below shows another way to think about the relationships between these concepts. The differences between consumer education and consumer engagement parallel the differences between parent involvement and family engagement. Consumer education can happen without consumer engagement; however, it is not possible to have consumer engagement without consumer education and informed consumers. Parent involvement can occur without family engagement, but family engagement cannot occur without parent involvement.



In other words, consumer engagement has specific activities that precede it (e.g., outreach and consumer education), in the same way that parent involvement precedes family engagement. Consumer engagement and family engagement are distinct processes that mutually reinforce each other.

Some families may use early childhood and school-age services and engage with professionals without focusing on consumer engagement activities. At the same time, other families may be engaged as consumers, but may not be engaged with their child’s program in other ways, for example in the kinds of activities associated with parent involvement.

Relationship-Based Practices

Relationship-based practices are essential to consumer engagement and family engagement. In consumer engagement, these practices guide professionals to welcome families' preferences and priorities as families plan and make decisions for their children about programs and services.

When we use relationship-based practices, we reflect on families' opinions and preferences with a “seek first to understand, then be understood” perspective. We honor the circumstances, cultures, and values of families and respect their experiences in sharing the care of their children. Professionals applying these practices seek out and support family expertise about what is best for their children.

Relationship-based consumer engagement practices recognize how important and challenging it can be to find early childhood, school-age care, and comprehensive services that are the best match for families, especially given the many demands on families' time and other resources.

Professionals use relationship-building practices when they do the following:

- Respect the importance of family expertise, and regard family contributions as central to the consumer engagement process
- Value the role of families as their children's lifelong teachers, caregivers, and advocates

Consumer Engagement: What Can Professionals Do?

The concepts in this resource are intended to provide a vision for advancing consumer education practices toward consumer engagement. Here are some examples of consumer engagement in practice:

- An agency responsible for training subsidy intake staff invites families to talk about their experiences receiving such referrals and connecting with services. Subsidy intake staff use family feedback to inform quality improvement efforts.
- A State administrator coordinates listening sessions with professionals and families to identify questions and concerns about background checks, monitoring, and inspections and later follows up to collect feedback on resources created and based on the results of the listening session.
- An early learning advisory committee convenes early childhood professionals and families for a strategic planning meeting focused on increasing opportunities for two-way communications between families and professionals about program quality and access.



State, Territory, and Tribal administrators and other system professionals, including agencies responsible for consumer education, can use all of these ideas and draw inspiration from these examples to help promote consumer engagement in their communities.

Summary

As part of a broader set of activities to engage parents and families, consumer engagement practices can contribute to the healthy development of children and to positive outcomes for families. At the same time, the reciprocal nature of consumer engagement can vitalize early childhood and school-age care and education systems and programs.



Additional Resources

- Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/building-partnerships-developing-relationships-families.pdf>
- Partnering with Families: Building Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/learning-module/partnering-families-building-positive-goal-oriented-relationships>
- Parent Involvement and Family Engagement for Early Childhood Professionals
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/parent-involvement-family-engagement-for-professionals.pdf>

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