

# PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES to Improve Outcomes

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) invests in a network of community-based organizations and programs to alleviate the effects of poverty and to provide opportunities for New Yorkers and communities to flourish. DYCD serves youth and families across New York City through afterschool programs, employment programs, services for homeless and runaway youth, immigration services, literacy programs for adults and youth, and other community development programs. DYCD is invested in understanding what works in youth and community development programs.

Through *DYCD Focus*, an occasional series of thematic stories on best practices across DYCD programs, we will share information gathered from DYCD programs, as appropriate to the topic. This edition of *Focus* is the first of a series that will focus on family engagement. In this edition we feature the Beacon Program, Comprehensive Afterschool System of NYC (COMPASS) elementary programs, COMPASS middle school programs (known as School's Out New York City, or SONYC), DYCD Literacy Programs, the Fatherhood Initiative, Healthy Families Programs, Healthy Families Programs, and Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs.



## Why Family Engagement?

The research is clear—engaging families regularly in educational and community development programs leads to better outcomes for the participants and their families, enhances the connection among family members, and contributes to overall family well-being.<sup>1</sup> Family engagement in youth programs improves youth educational outcomes. Studies of family engagement in youth programs have found:

- Youth had improved focus, emotional and social development, achievement, and school attachment when programs used at least one of the following strategies: encouraging family participation in the program design, offering workshops or learning events for family members, and providing opportunities for families to engage in program activities at home (e.g., working on a project at home that is an extension of the program).<sup>2</sup>
- Programs that provide adults opportunities for peer support, focus on self-development, and use professional staff improve family members' knowledge, attitudes, and parenting behaviors.<sup>3</sup>
- Family members who were invited to participate in programming learned more about their children's skills and interests and engaged in more meaningful conversations with their children.<sup>4</sup>

## What Are DYCD Programs Doing to Partner With Families?

DYCD knows the importance of family engagement in helping improve outcomes for all family members and in community building. DYCD has made partnering with families a priority. An essential aspect of those partnerships involves defining families in the broadest possible way. DYCD has adopted a *Family Engagement Framework* (see graphic below) based on the idea that the best way to partner with families is by creating a circle of support that is mutually beneficial, built on trust, and embraces the notion that programs and families have a shared responsibility for participant success. DYCD programs embody this framework through three key strategies—*communication*, *participation*, and *partnerships*.



**Communication:** Program-family interactions are strong and positive.

**Participation:** Families engage in program activities and access needed services.

**Partnerships:** Families share responsibility for participant outcomes.

**Family engagement through communication**—DYCD programs communicate with families in a variety of ways, understanding that families have a variety of needs and schedules. To build trust and communication, DYCD programs are welcoming and make it a point to reach out to families when there is something positive to say, not only when there is a problem. Programs communicate with families regularly throughout the year in many different ways—face to face, making phone calls, texting, e-mailing family members, posting information on websites, disseminating program newsletters, or sending letters home. Finally, DYCD programs understand that it is essential to be welcoming as well as sensitive to language and cultural differences in their methods of communication.

**Family engagement through participation**—DYCD programs partner with families by creating more opportunities for participation in a range of services. For example, in the 2014–15 school year, SONYC programs served 58,745 youth in 459 programs. Of those, 316 programs were new, meaning that 40,043 new youth and their families who may have not been previously engaged in afterschool programs learned about the programs, enrolled their children, and were clear on program policies and procedures. Likewise, the Fatherhood Initiative dramatically increased noncustodial fathers' involvement in their children's lives in 2014–15: Among fathers who had had less-than-weekly contact with their child over the 3 months prior to intake, at follow-up more than two-thirds of young fathers (67 percent) reported at least weekly contact, as did 55 percent of older fathers and 40 percent of justice-involved fathers. Although enrollment is a very basic measure of participation, it is an important first step, particularly in engaging families that are hard to reach or traditionally underserved in the community.

**Family engagement through mutually beneficial partnerships**—DYCD programs engage families through both educational and social activities for the whole family as well as by providing opportunities for families to share their own voice, make choices, and take on leadership roles. For example, some DYCD programs host family literacy activities or monthly family dinners to bring families together for both learning and social opportunities. Many afterschool programs collaborate with schools on events so that families can engage with the school and the afterschool program at the same time. Other programs encourage family members to serve on or lead advisory committees, share their interests and opinions through surveys, or partner on efforts to advocate for the program and its services.

**Embrace a broad definition of family**—Many programs aim to engage a variety of individuals who play supportive roles or consider themselves family of program participants (e.g., those that support runaway and homeless youth and noncustodial fathers). It is important for programs to broaden their definition of family and be inclusive of all individuals, caregivers, and groups of people that serve a critical supportive role, regardless of their living arrangements or personal and custodial relationships.

## Top Tips for Successful Family Engagement—Ideas From DYCD Programs

**Tell families about your program.** Ensure families know about program activities and opportunities to partner. Collaborate with other family support programs, coordinate dual-purpose events, and use networks of connected families to communicate with families who are not already program participants or who may be hard to reach.



One SONYC program developed a brochure for families that highlights the program's offerings, includes quotes from families of past participants, and has photos of youth engaged in program activities. The brochure also includes powerful information on the program that is designed to appeal to families and express the program's values and specific strengths, such as "This year alone [we] provided more than 420 hours of physical activity to over 5,000 students" and "[we are] working with schools to provide students with 35% more learning time."

**Create a welcoming space.** Family members should feel welcome in and supported by the program. Make sure to offer materials in your audiences' primary language so that family members whose first language is not English feel included. This is a small gesture that tells family members they are valued.



One SONYC program does this by posting a sign at the entrance to the program welcoming families in all of the languages spoken by participants.

**Take advantage of natural opportunities.** Encourage staff to talk with families during times when they are naturally present, such as during pick-up or during an adult education class, to engage families more deeply. For example, COMPASS [Comprehensive After School System of NYC] elementary program directors and staff are encouraged to be present and available during dismissal time so they can engage in critical face-to-face conversations with family members.



One Beacon community center found a way to build naturally on family member availability. The center hosts activities on Saturdays. After a while, they noticed that many family members would wait in the cafeteria for their children to finish their activities. To take advantage of that situation, the program offered to turn that time into an opportunity for the group to form a family advisory team, meeting weekly to plan events, discuss ways in which the program can best support families, and make critical decisions about the program.

**Use social networks for good.** We all listen to our peers for guidance and advice. Some programs capitalize on this by identifying strong program advocates to speak to other adults in the community about the value of the program. All DYCD programs should encourage families to learn about the program and advocate on its behalf; for example, through letters or calls to local elected officials. This helps to support efforts to secure additional resources to meet family and community needs.



DYCD's Fatherhood Initiative asks fathers who have gone through the program and had a transformative experience to share that experience with other fathers who may want to learn more about the program or are considering signing up.

**Meet families where they are.** Successful programs recognize that families are busy with all that life requires—jobs, household chores, and other activities. The Healthy Families program offers a weight-loss program. To help participants with their goals, they involve the whole family by visiting their home and talking about how everyone can be supportive of healthy lifestyle choices.



One Beacon community center hosts pizza dinners that incorporate program activities. This practice recognizes that families have to go home and eat dinner anyway, so this event helps take away a chore from caregivers rather than adding to their already busy lives. Find ways to help reduce rather than add to families' stress and burden.

**Offer family workshops.** Busy families may be more likely to participate in activities if these allow them to spend time together. Many programs determine what types of workshops to host by conducting surveys or asking families what they need or are interested in.



One SONYC program holds practical workshops to help families with the high school application process, whereas another program holds art therapy workshops where youth and families work together to create a piece of art.

**Offer or refer families to appropriate support services.** DYCD programs offer critical services to address the needs of participants and their families. For example, some COMPASS elementary programs provide services for the families of youth with incarcerated parents, such as therapy, other medical services, English as a second language classes, and transportation to visit the incarcerated family member. Multiservice organizations can let family members know about other services offered by the organization, in addition to the ones already attended by some family members. Programs that do not offer all the services a family needs may refer families to other services in the community.



DYCD Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs work with youth in drop-in, crisis, and long-term centers where a central goal is to help youth and families reunite. This process often involves support services that promote understanding and acceptance, particularly for LGBTQ youth.

**Highlight accomplishments.** Find ways to highlight success. For example, host an event where participants can showcase their work and invite community members to see what family groups have worked on together. The DYCD Literacy Programs often invite family members to observe children's learning experiences. This gives families an opportunity not only to see the child's accomplishments but also to experience the classroom, witness the child's learning style, and learn complementary activities to try at home.



One SONYC program director described how program staff had hosted a poetry slam focused on cultural identity. The program director stated that "family members wanted to come to that because they wanted to hear what their kids had to say about their families and their lives. It was a nice way to connect them." These events connect families and their children who are, as one program staff person described, "really eager to show off what they have learned" for their families. Not to mention the fact that this creates even more family time!

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Booth, A., & Dunn, J. F. (Eds.) (1996). *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591(1), 98-124; Clark, R. M. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: Why poor black children succeed or fail*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Dishion, T. J., Patterson, G. R., Stoolmiller, M., & Skinner, M. L. (1991). Family, school, and behavioral antecedents to early adolescent involvement with antisocial peers. *Developmental Psychology*, 27(1), 172-180; Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. H. (2006). Family support program quality and parent, family and child benefits. *Winterberry Press Monograph Series*. Asheville, NC: Winterberry Press; Harris, E., Rosenberg, H., & Wallace, A. (2012). *Families and expanded learning opportunities: Working together to support children's learning* (Brief No. 2). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project & Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures; Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (Eds.) (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to academic achievement*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education.
- <sup>2</sup> Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591(1), 98-124.
- <sup>3</sup> Layzer, J., Goodson, B., Bernstein, L., & Price, C. (2001). *National evaluation of family support programs, final report volume A: The meta-analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.
- <sup>4</sup> Harris, E., Rosenberg, H., & Wallace, A. (2012). *Families and expanded learning opportunities: Working together to support children's learning* (Brief No. 2). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project & Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.

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