

Module Three: Strengths-based Attitudes

Handout 1: Discussion

Why This Matters for Subsidy Staff

By using a strengths-based approach in their work with families, subsidy staff can build rapport and trust with families. This rapport and trust helps families feel more comfortable sharing the questions, concerns, and goals they have for their child and family. When families share information about their strengths, needs, and goals, subsidy staff are better able to offer information and support that families value. Staff can also feel more confident in their abilities and satisfied with their work.

Goal

- Subsidy staff use a strengths-based approach to build rapport with families and to help families feel more comfortable sharing the questions, concerns, and goals they have for their child and family.

Learning Objective

- Subsidy staff can identify Strengths-based Attitudes and opportunities to apply them in their work with families.

Key Competency

- Subsidy staff apply Strengths-based Attitudes and build rapport with families.

Discussion

Subsidy staff are an important first contact for families. Building rapport with parents can be challenging for many reasons—because of time constraints, for example, or competing priorities. Efforts to build rapport can be especially challenging when the communication method is virtual (e.g., online chat, email). Yet building rapport with parents is an important part of encouraging consumer engagement.

From the moment a parent reaches out to you for information about a subsidy for child care, there are opportunities to build rapport and engage with families. One-way information sharing, a typical component of consumer education, is an essential step towards building rapport. Building rapport, however, goes beyond making information available to families. Building rapport means developing mutually respectful relationships in which subsidy staff and parents can have conversations with one another and communicate well enough to understand each other's ideas, values, and opinions.

Asking parents to share information about their children and their thoughts about the type of child care they are seeking opens the door to a deeper conversation. Once the door is open, you can develop the conversation by asking parents about the goals and interests they have for their child and family. By asking parents to share what is happening in their lives, you also invite them to share any additional concerns, such as their need for housing, food, or health care.

Parents and professionals can foster these conversations by focusing on shared goals for children—for example, safe environments, sensitive caregiving, and opportunities for learning. Other goals may depend on family preferences, cultures, and economic or social circumstances. In general, professionals can build rapport with families by asking questions and learning from the family's experiences and knowledge.

Conversations with families require us to be open to seeing their perspectives. Sometimes we share the same perspective with families, and our conversations go smoothly. At other times, we are surprised by something or feel challenged. And there may be times when your agency cannot accommodate a family's request. No matter the situation, it always helps to approach a conversation with the family's strengths in mind.

A **strengths-based approach** involves:

- Acknowledging the strengths of families first
- Respecting and learning from differences
- Approaching families as equal and reciprocal partners

Within the parameters of the child care subsidy program, a **strengths-based approach** also involves:

- Showing openness to adapting your practices based on family preferences
- Sharing decision-making

Example: A mother misses a subsidy enrollment appointment. She calls and explains that she is having trouble making and keeping appointments because she's just started a new job. Using a strengths-based approach, you might thank her for calling and congratulate her on her new job. Then you might acknowledge her interest in attaining financial assistance for child care, and work with her to find alternative arrangements for an appointment—for example, by meeting with her at a time or location that doesn't require her to miss work.

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about someone or something. Attitudes can influence our ability to build relationships through conversations and interactions. We often see attitudes reflected in a person's behavior. **A Strengths-based Attitude can encourage collaboration.** Adopting a positive, Strengths-based Attitude does not mean avoiding challenges; instead it shows families that we want to work together to find a solution. The chart below lists several Strengths-based Attitudes for you to consider when working with families.

Strengths-based Attitudes

All families have strengths.	Each child and family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths first, even when there are challenges.
Families are the first and most important teachers of their children.	Parents and family members are the most important constant presence 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 child's development.	Families make choices every day that affect their child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
Families have expertise about their child and their family.	Families understand their children best and 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 families' suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their children.

Source: National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement. (2018). *Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices*.

Subsidy staff can convey Strengths-based Attitudes by incorporating strengths-based messages in communications with families. Incorporating key strengths-based messages builds rapport. These messages encourage consumer engagement and promote positive outcomes for family consumer engagement.

Strengths-based messages reflect families as:

- Effective decision makers
- Resourceful users of comprehensive services that support child and family well-being
- Trusted sources of information in their families and among their peers
- Leaders to advance quality for their child and their community

Strengths-based messages recognize the important roles of parents. Strengths-based messages can be enhanced with suggestions for action. For example:

- “You are your child’s first and most important teacher. As you search for an early childhood or school-age care and education program, consider which program best matches your family’s and child’s approach to learning.”
- “You are the expert on your child and family. Look for an early childhood or school-age care and education professional who asks for and respects your input.”
- “You have a critical role in your family’s development. Talk with your early childhood or school-age care and education professional about your family’s strengths, needs, and goals.”
- “Your contributions in decision-making for your child are important and valuable. Work with your early childhood or school-age care and education professional to find ways that together you can support your child’s learning in child care and at home.”

- “If you have a school-age child, look for before-school, after-school, and summer programs that provide learning opportunities, promote health and safety, and welcome your involvement.”

By building rapport with families and applying Strengths-based Attitudes, subsidy staff can affirm parents’ roles as their children’s first and most important teachers and as engaged consumers of early childhood, school-age, and comprehensive services.

Leaders can support staff by:

- Creating a positive organizational culture and climate that fosters a strengths-based approach
- Ensuring that staff understand and have opportunities to practice applying and reflecting on Strengths-based Attitudes (e.g., providing reflective supervision, protecting time for staff to share ideas that enhance their practices)
- Creating policies and procedures that promote the application of Strengths-based Attitudes
- Working with families and staff to incorporate strengths-based messages into agency communications (e.g., print materials, website content)

Reflective supervision refers to a collaborative relationship to support professional growth. Supervisors facilitate staff’s reflection by offering time for dialogue about performance and by asking them to evaluate themselves. The process of reflective supervision helps identify staff’s strengths and challenges, and it addresses their needs for training or support.

Adapted from: Early Head Start National Resource Center. (n.d.) *A Collection of Tips on Becoming a Reflective Supervisor*.

Thoughts From the Field

“When I am waiting for a family to come into my office, I take a deep breath and think to myself, ‘All families have strengths, no matter what challenges they face.’ Bottom line: all families want what is best for their child. I want to encourage parents to share their hopes and maybe their fears with me.

When families feel comfortable enough to do that, I can offer assistance based on what they are asking. Sometimes it is hard work. But when I take a positive attitude, the conversations seem to flow because families sense I am truly listening and looking for the positive.”—*Subsidy staff*

Use this space to note ideas or questions.

Plan to save copies of these handouts. You will have an opportunity to use them to create a summary reflection after completing all of the modules in this series.

Module Three: Strengths-based Attitudes

Handout 2: Activity

1. What are examples of feelings or ways of thinking that may influence your interactions with families seeking subsidy assistance? Consider not only your own attitudes but also the attitudes of families.

Hint: Think about opportunities you might have had to interact with families. For example, a father mentions that he's looking for a highly rated program for his infant son. He'd like the program to be close to his work. He needs care in two weeks. How do you feel? What do you think?

2. Which of the Strengths-based Attitudes (explained in **Module 3: Handout 1**) might be helpful to consider applying in your interactions with families? Why?

Use this space to note ideas or questions.

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Handout 3: Reflective Practice Exercise

Learning a new approach, skill, or activity is a process. Reflective practice is a way of thinking about your actions—what you do and how and why you do it. The purpose of this kind of examination is to continuously learn by enhancing your skills and practices. Answer the questions below to guide your reflections on Strengths-based Attitudes.

Reflective Practice

Question	Your Reflections
What did I hope to learn?	
What did I learn?	
What action will I take because of what I have learned?	

Use this space to note ideas or questions.

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