Family Engagement

When families are actively engaged in their children's lives, the children are likely to have better outcomes. Research shows that children with engaged families have improved academic performance, school attendance, graduation rates, motivation, self-esteem and overall well-being. They also are less likely to be suspended from school, abuse drugs or alcohol, or act out violently.[1] Furthermore, these benefits remain true regardless of a family's household income, race or ethnicity.[2]
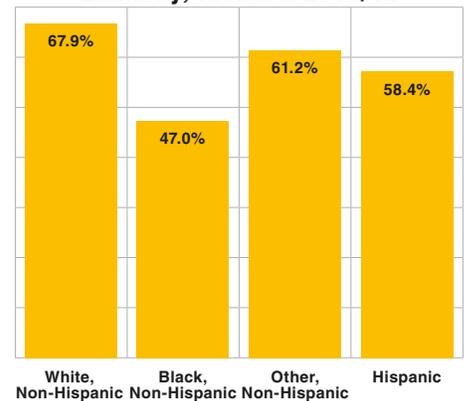
In Indiana, nearly two-thirds of parents report always attending their children's activities and events,[3] and one in three Hoosier middle and high school students say that their parents notice when they are doing a good job.[4]

• Slightly more than a third of Indiana's middle and high school students have parents who notice when they are doing a good job (34.2%) and tell the students they are proud of them (35.6%).[5]

However, many families face barriers to engaging with school and out-of-school time programming. For example, some families have transportation or time limitations, and others may feel as though they are unwelcome to participate. Schools and community partners (such as out-of-school time programs) both have important roles to play in helping engage parents in their children's education and well-being. Because they are working toward the same engagement goal, it's key for schools and community partners to work together.

This brief provides an overview of Hoosier children living in a variety of family types, reviews best practice literature from both from in- and out-of-school settings, and explores how to address the barriers to participation in children's activities that many families may face.

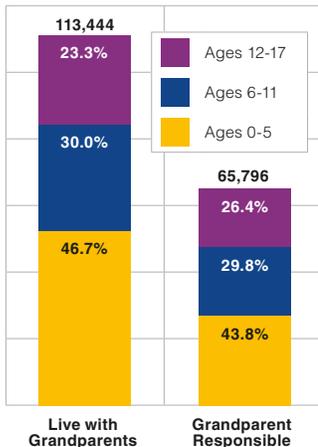**Percentage of Parents Who Always Attend Child's Activities, by Race and Ethnicity, Indiana: 2011/12**

67.9%	47.0%	61.2%	58.4%
White, Non-Hispanic	Black, Non-Hispanic	Other, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic

Source: National Survey of Children's Health

Ways for families to engage with programs:[6]	
Learning - Families may learn specific skills from program events and activities that they are then able to practice at home.	**Setting the stage** - Families may help set expectations and priorities for their children at home before they come to the program.
Communicating - Families may read and respond to program communication in writing or in person.	**Decision-making** - Families may be involved in decision-making about policies or procedures in the program.
Volunteering - Families may use their skills and talents to volunteer with the program.	**Advocating** - Families may serve as advocates for their children and others in the community.
Setting the stage - Families may help set expectations and priorities for their children at home before they come to the program.	**Other ways families may be involved in programs:** as employees, board members, advisors, advocates, focus groups, volunteers, tutors, mentors, participants, leaders, chaperones.

Children Living with a Grandparent Householder by Age of Grandchild and Grandparent Responsibility, Indiana: 2013

113,444

- 23.3% Ages 12-17
- 30.0% Ages 6-11
- 46.7% Ages 0-5

65,796

- 26.4%
- 29.8%
- 43.8%

Live with Grandparents **Grandparent Responsible**

Source: American Community Survey: Table S1001

Family Type Influences Family Engagement

Children in Indiana experience a variety of living situations. Most Indiana children live in families with married parents (65.6%), and in families in which a biological parent is the householder (81.9%).[7] However, many children live in other types of families, including families in which the biological parent is not the main caregiver. For example, some children live in families where a grandparent or stepparent is primarily responsible for them, and others live in households with foster or other unrelated family members.

• 24.7 percent of Hoosier children live in single-mother families, and 7.3 percent live in single-father families.[8]

In Indiana, 113,444 children live with their grandparents. However, the grandparent is only directly responsible for the grandchild in about half of those households (48.3%).[9]

Caring adults in all family types have both strengths for and barriers to active participation in their children's activities. Programs seeking to engage families in meaningful ways must take these differences into account when creating opportunities for engagement.[10]

Percentage of Children in Single Parent or Other Households, Indiana: 2013

- Unmarried Partner Present: 7.8%
- Foster or Other Unrelated: 2.3%
- Single Father: 7.3%
- Single Mother: 24.7%
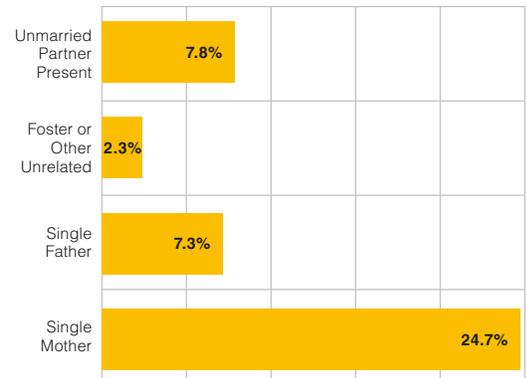
Source: American Community Survey, Tables B17006 and B09018

Treat Families as Partners; Build on their Strengths

All families have hopes and goals for their children, and all families have strengths or assets that can help children attain those goals. Programs seeking to engage families should build from those family strengths and provide tools and trainings in areas where families still have room to grow. An important first step for helping families build upon their strengths is to listen closely to their thoughts and concerns— treat families as partners working toward shared goals for their children. Family members who feel heard often are more willing to connect with program staff.

Train and Support Staff

Programs looking to improve their family engagement strategies must provide training to staff members on cultural competencies and set up organizational policies and procedures that support parent-staff interactions. Some examples of ways to support staff in engaging families are listed below:

• Use asset-based language to discuss families within the program.

• Identify a family liaison from your staff or volunteer base, and ensure the person is enabled to serve as a first contact for families who have questions or concerns.

• Include family engagement as part of initial job training for staff.

• Ensure program leaders are actively engaged with families.

• Talk about progress and barriers to family engagement in staff meetings.

• Look at the resources section of this brief for more information on where to find training for staff.

Some ways to help families see themselves as partners include:

• Be clear about program goals and what those goals mean for children.

• Use parent feedback when planning the program.

• Work with families to come up with work plans for their children's progress in the program.

• Identify how families can work around barriers to meet program expectations for their involvement.

• Frame growth areas as incremental steps for helping children succeed.

The Family Assets Framework

The Family Assets Framework is a research-informed model that encourages supporting families' strengths in order to improve childhood well-being.

This framework may be used in communities, programs, schools or other such groups. http://www.search-institute.org/research/family-strengths

Address Barriers to Family Engagement

While some families are comfortable engaging in program activities and events, others face barriers to participation. Finding out exactly what types of families your program serves can be difficult, and many families have multiple barriers to engagement. However, intake forms, surveys and in-person conversations can help you identify the particular barriers that affect the families you serve.
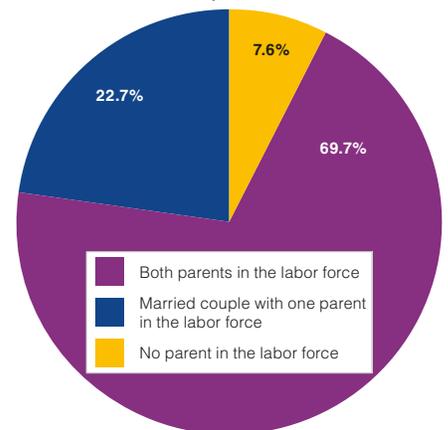
Though different families have different barriers, any parent can be "hard to reach." Be thoughtful about the families of children you serve and try to address any potential barriers to participation. Some barriers that families face are:

Have Schedule Conflicts

Some families face barriers to participation in their children's activities because of their schedules. Many parents' work schedules overlap program or event times—family members who are in the military may be away for weeks or months. Other families have multiple children's schedules to balance and may not have time to be present at all events for all children.

- Nearly four out of five Indiana parents work (78.9%), and another 4.3 percent are looking for work.[11]
- For every thirteen children in Indiana, nine live in families where all parents are employed or looking for work (69.7%).[12]
- Indiana is home to 20,151 reserve members (including National Guard) and 801 active duty military members.[13]
- 5.4 percent of Indiana's middle and high school students have a parent who served in the military in the last ten years and of those parents, about half served in a war zone (52.1%).[14]
- More than 177,000 families in Indiana have three or more children younger than age 18. These multi-child families make up nearly 11 percent of all families and 22.5 percent of families with children in the state.[15]

Parental Labor Force Status for Children, Indiana: 2013

- 7.6%
- 22.7%
- 69.7%

Both parents in the labor force
Married couple with one parent in the labor force
No parent in the labor force

Source: American Community Survey: Table B23008

What you can do about it

There are a variety of reasons why family members simply are not able to make it to program events and activities. However, when these barriers cannot be overcome, programs should consider a variety of different options for families to be engaged, such as participating in events via video chat or creating opportunities for engagement that do not require the families to be present in person. Other ideas include:

- Provide child care during program events and activities.
- Vary the times of day that families are asked to attend events and activities.

Especially for military families, be aware that most family members feel a sense of independence and responsibility for each other.

Recognize that siblings and other family members may feel responsible for a child and want to participate in program events or that a child may want to 'take the pressure off' his or her family to be active.

Don't Have Transportation

Some family members can't attend program events and activities simply because they can't get there. Families in both urban and rural areas may have problems with transportation that impede their participation in program events or activities.

- Over the last three years, Indiana's urban population has increased 1.8 percent, as its rural population has decreased 0.4 percent, making the rural areas even less dense.
- 5.2 percent of children live in households with no vehicles available, and another 21.9 percent have one vehicle available.

What you can do about it

The most direct way to alleviate transportation issues for families is to find a way for the program to provide transportation to and from events. However, below are some ideas about how to meet families where they are instead of bringing them to your program:

- Hold meetings in locations other than where your program normally operates.
- Have program staff do home visits.
- Go to locations or events where families are naturally present such as grocery stores, parks or community events.

Lack a Sense of Long-Term Connection

Families that are highly mobile may lack a long-term connection to a specific school or program in which their children participate. This feeling of disconnection can be a barrier to engagement with their child's progress in that particular program. For example, a family that is likely to move in a few months may not be excited about planning or attending an upcoming event if they are unsure whether their child will still be in the program at that time.

- 42.8 percent of Indiana children have moved two to five times in their lives, and 5.9 percent have moved six or more times.
- In 2013, the Indiana Department of Education (DOE) identified 15,777 homeless youth, an increase from 12,248 in 2010.

What you can do about it

Families who lack a long-term connection with a particular location or program need ways to be engaged in the short term. For example, a program with a performance at the end may not work well for highly mobile families. However, these families may respond to opportunities to share their experiences (like career day) or chaperone a specific event.

Feel Unwelcome

Families may feel unwelcome in a program's environment for a variety of reasons. For example, some families may not feel as though they fit in with other program participants' families because of differences in race, ethnicity, income level, or religious affiliation, and some families may feel unwelcome just because they were never asked or invited to participate.

- More than one in four Indiana children are a minority race or ethnicity (27.0%) including 11.0 percent Black, 0.2 percent American Indian, 1.9 percent Asian, 10.3 percent Hispanic of any race, and 3.7 percent other races.
- Half of Hoosier youth attend religious services once or more a week (52.4%), and 22.5 percent never attend them.
- More than one in five Indiana children live in poverty (22.2%), nearly half of whom live in deep poverty (10.1% overall living at less than half of the poverty rate).

What you can do about it

To make families feel more welcome, try creating a physical space for them at your location. Invite all families using multiple forms of communication such as email, phone calls, written invitations, and in-person conversations.

If possible, find families who are currently active to serve as informal mentors to those who do not participate. Building trust with family members is an important first step to engaging families in a meaningful way.

Other ways to make a program's environment more welcoming for families are:

- Create public displays of participants' work.
- Post signage so that families know where to go.
- Designate a specific space/room as a family lounge or reception area.
- Hire staff with experiences and backgrounds similar to the families served.
- Provide natural incentives for participating, such as food if a program is at dinner time.
- Require families to sign their children in and out for the program to encourage face-to-face contact with program staff.
- Ask families to attend using multiple paths of communication.
- Ensure program staff are available to greet families as they arrive.
- Call or email families with good news in addition to negative news.

What you can do about it

Be aware of how families using your program receive information best, and define family engagement for your particular program. This will increase a family's ability to meet those expectations.

Program staff should communicate with families about upcoming events or action items, program goals, and areas for improvement for their children, as well as about good news or positive feedback about their child's participation.

Some ideas for communicating with families include:

- Send home instructions or tools to help families reinforce the lessons or skills learned during program hours.
- Conduct home visits.
- Follow up when a parent doesn't attend an event.
- Send letters home with the participants.
- Create an online portal for information if community members have access to the technology.

Don't Understand How to Participate

Some families don't participate in meaningful ways because they don't understand how they are able or expected to do so. Not all families have access to the same knowledge and resources. For example, some families have no home phone line or cannot easily access a computer with Internet; some family members may have difficulty reading or understanding English.

- Nearly one in ten Indiana children speak a language other than English at home (9.7%), and 90 percent of them also speak English well or very well.
- One fourth of Indiana adults ages 25-64 have a bachelor's degree or higher (25.5%), an additional 9.2 percent have an associates degree, nearly one fourth have some college experience without a degree (22.4%), 32.1% have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 10.8% have less than a high school diploma.
- 8.4 percent of Indiana children do not have access to a computer at home, and another 12.2% have a computer but no Internet access.
- Nearly three fourths of teens in the United States have or have access to a smartphone (73%), but 12% do not have access to any type of cell phone.

Communicating with Families

Family involvement in practice can range from a lack of involvement to over-involvement.

Many potential conflicts between staff and parents can be mitigated through transparency about program rules and procedures and by setting expectations about family and staff roles early.

Families are valuable partners, and youth benefit most when families and program staff can work together toward shared goals.
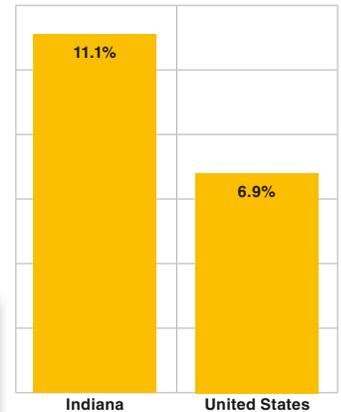
Are Inhibited by Institutional Rules

Some families, especially those involved with specific institutions, may have laws or other restrictions that prevent them from actively engaging in their child's programs. For example, divorced parents may have strict visitation schedules or limitations, families with domestic violence may have protective orders in place, or a child's social worker may have rules against sharing information with biological parents once a child has been placed in a foster family.

• 23.9 percent of Hoosier children have ever lived with a parent or guardian who got divorced or separated after they were born.

• Indiana's population of incarcerated adults has grown from 21,425 in 2002 to 29,220 in 2014. National estimates indicate that 61.7 percent of female inmates and 51.2 percent of male inmates have children younger than the age of 18.

• 11.1 percent of Indiana children (ages 0-17) have lived with a parent who served time in jail or prison, the second-highest rate nationally.

What you can do about it

Learn the rules surrounding the family situations of children in your program.
A child's social worker or legal guardian can set guidelines regarding other family members' participation in the program. Following these rules, invite family members to participate as applicable.

Percentage of Children who Ever Lived with a Parent or Guardian who Served Time in Jail or Prison, Indiana & United States: 2011/12

Indiana	United States
11.1%	6.9%

Source: National Survey of Children's Health

Face Difficult Family Circumstances

No matter how important being engaged is, sometimes family events and circumstances are so consuming that a family cannot find space in their lives to become actively involved in their children's programs. For example, in families where a parent, grandparent or other family member has a serious illness, children often must tend to the family member's needs instead of the other way around. Similarly, a family member with a mental health or substance abuse problem may not be able to actively engage in a child's activities.

In extreme circumstances, a child may have a completely absent parent due to the child being homeless and unaccompanied by an adult, having been emancipated, or having a parent who has died. In these cases, be aware that the youth's definition of family may include friends or relatives, or that he/she may not have anyone to serve in the "engaged family member" role.

What you can do about it

When families are dealing with issues that your program is not equipped to handle, partner with or provide referrals to other community services that may be able to help.
Be understanding, and work with families to find levels and types of engagement that work for them. Sometimes simply being a safe place for a child is the best that a program can offer.

• More than one in ten Hoosier children ages 0-17 have lived with someone who was mentally ill or suicidal (11.1%).

• 13.4 percent of Indiana children have lived with someone who had a problem with alcohol or drugs, greater than the national rate of 10.7 percent.

• 4.2 percent of Indiana children ages 0-17 have lived with a parent or guardian who died.

• Nationally, 4.5 percent of homeless children younger than 18 are unaccompanied by an adult.

Resources

The Afterschool Alliance provides fact sheets, issue briefs and reports on popular topics affecting out-of-school time programs, including an issue brief specifically on Successful Parent Engagement. http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_57_Parent_Engagement.cfm

The Afterschool Corporation (TASC) provides a free handbook for Increasing Family and Parent Engagement in After-School. http://www.expandedschools.org/tools/increasing-parent-family-engagement-after-school#sthash.DwUORYMb.dpbs

Child Trends provides research-informed best practice briefs on what works when engaging families in school and out-of-school time programs.

- **Tips and Techniques for Effective Family Engagement** http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/2011-32FamilytoTable1.pdf

- **Building, Engaging, and Supporting Family and Parental Involvement in Out-of-School Time Programs** http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/Child_Trends-2007_06_19_RB_ParentEngage.pdf

- **What Works for Parent Involvement Programs** http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=what-works-for-parent-involvement-programs-for-children

The Indiana Youth Institute provides free webinars on many youth development topics, including cultural competence and working with parents, available at: http://www.iyi.org/trainings/webinars.aspx

The National Council of La Raza produced an issue brief about best practices for engaging the families of Latino children. http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/preparing_young_latino_children_for_school_sucess_best_practices_in_family_engagement/

Build the Out-of-School Time Network, along with the Harvard Family Research Project and the United Way of Massachusetts Bay created a free Toolkit for family engagement available at: http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/focus-on-families!-how-to-build-and-support-family-centered-practices-in-after-school

The 4H Leaders Guide includes tips for working with parents and families of program participants. That guide is available for free online at: http://www.4-h.org/resource-library/4-h-volunteer-resources/organization/

The Virginia Beall Ball Library at the Indiana Youth Institute is home to many great books and other resources about family and parent engagement. For bibliographies of resources available on all types of topics visit: http://www.iyi.org/library/bibliographies.aspx

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IYI Resources

The Indiana Youth Institute
Serving those who impact youth

603 East Washington Street, Suite 800
Indianapolis, IN 46204
317.396.2700 or 800.343.7060
iyi.org

The latest data is at your fingertips with IYI's Data Center. Search statistics and gather data to improve your program planning and grant writing or, request customized data. Go to www.iyi.org/data.

Get the most comprehensive overview of children's well-being in Indiana. **Download the Kids Count in Indiana Data Book** at www.iyi.org/databook.

Want in-depth information on youth? Check out the free resources at **IYI's Virginia Beall Ball Library.** We will mail you the library materials and include a postage paid return envelope. Go to www.iyi.org/library for details.

Have a quick question or want to bounce an idea around? **Contact Ask IYI for free resources and tips:** call 1-855-2ask-IYI or visit www.iyi.org/ask.

Looking for training on youth issues? IYI provides regional trainings and free webinars on youth development and nonprofit management. Go to www.iyi.org/trainings for details.

Need one-on-one assistance with planning, evaluating, or expanding your organization? Benefit from IYI's Consulting Services and receive professional help at affordable hourly rates – discounted far below market value. Go to www.iyi.org/consulting-services for details.