



# Promoting and Measuring Family and Community Engagement for Healthy Early Childhood Development

## Family and Community Knowledge Systems

Family and community knowledge systems are the informal and formal ways in which children learn in their home and community environments. They are the glue that holds family and community together and contributes to their resiliency and effectiveness.

The Family and Community Knowledge Systems Project:

- Underscores the importance of how programs recognize, interact with, and support these important systems in which children are embedded.
- Aims to expand how we define and support healthy whole-child development and program quality from the perspective of family and community knowledge systems.
- Highlights and measures ways to strengthen family and community engagement with formal systems to improve early childhood programs, policies, and practices -- particularly for low-income children and children of color.

## Family and community engagement tools

### About the tools

Richard Chase and Betty Emarita developed and tested two tools by listening to the voices of parents and early childhood development professionals whose practices support whole child development and well-being in diverse communities. The voices in the Family and Community Knowledge Project represent both urban and rural communities and many ethnic and cultural heritages, including African American, German, Hmong, Irish, Latino, Norwegian, Ojibwe, Somali, and Swedish.

The family and community engagement **tool for parents** assesses healthy early childhood development from the perspective of family and community knowledge systems.

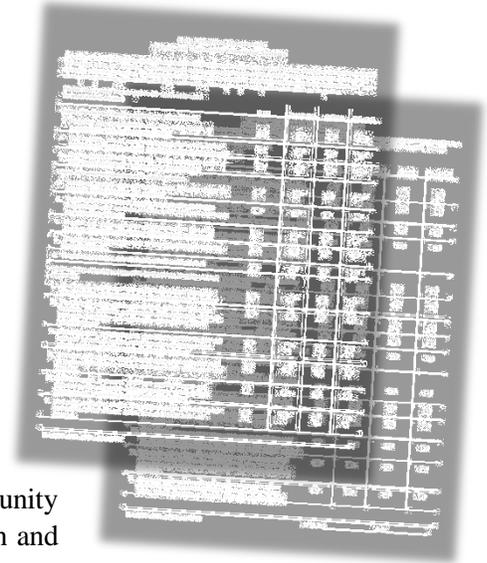
The family and community engagement **tool for providers and program staff** assesses program quality from a family and community knowledge systems perspective.

**Together**, the tools measure family and community engagement based upon valuing and respecting family and community connections and wisdom and including families as an integral part of program design and decisions.

A 14-item survey tool for parents assesses healthy early childhood development from the perspective of family and community knowledge systems. It provides a vehicle for measuring and discussing extended family support and connections; family and community transmission of moral and cultural values; respect for self and others; and the extent to which families' experiences with institutions, programs, and agencies are responsive and supportive.

A 15-item survey tool for providers and program staff provides a means for reflecting upon, measuring, and discussing new dimensions of quality as they relate to family and community knowledge systems, including building character and integrity in children, helping children develop a sense of self, and understanding and valuing all types of families within a community context.

Together, the tools measure and promote levels of family engagement that go deeper than language and logistics. This deeper engagement is based upon valuing and respecting family and community wisdom and including families as an integral part of program design and decisions.



## Uses and impacts of the tools for family and community engagement

When results of the two tools are compared, issues for discussion emerge that can lead to new strategies for improving program quality. For example:

- What can be done to strengthen and increase capacity to provide support and connections within extended families and within communities?
- What are some of the barriers to changing program rules and requirements in response to what is learned from families and communities? How can those barriers be reduced?
- How can the observations of families about their children's skills and abilities be useful to both families and program staff?
- What can be done by families and child caring programs to better mutually support and reinforce positive cultural messages communicated to children?

The tools are also useful for measuring family engagement outcomes, defined as:

- Isolated families become connected and supported.
- Families have a voice in program frameworks, practices, requirements, and strategies that support them and their communities.
- Families and child caring programs mutually support and reinforce positive cultural messages communicated to children.

In addition, the tools are a catalyst for multidimensional systemic change by:

- Supporting children’s transitions between home and other learning environments.
- Providing a vehicle for parents and staff from diverse cultures to better understand each other and to create an environment where all children thrive.
- Increasing and deepening parent engagement in program design and in policy decisions that affect them in order to prevent problems rather than rectifying them after they occur.



- Helping to reshape how program quality and child development are defined and assessed, taking into account the whole child within the context of family and community.
- Giving organizations that effectively serve vulnerable children and families a tool to assess their impact over time and capture the attention of funders and policymakers.
- Generating new data that can improve policies, programs, and practices for children across education, health, and human service agencies.

## Options for using the family and community engagement tools

The tools can be used separately or together. They can be used once to assess the current level of child development, program quality, and family and community engagement from the perspective of family and community knowledge systems. They can also be used to produce repeated measures to assess any improvements over time.

The tools can be used separately or together by following a self-guided manual that explains how to administer the tools, process the data, and interpret the results. Advice and consultation are available at an hourly rate.

Betty Emarita is available on a fee basis to train a group of providers and staff to administer the tools with parents and staff/providers, facilitate learning sessions with families and staff in individual programs to complete the tools, and/or to lead a joint learning session with families and staff to review issues that emerged and to devise strategies for addressing them.

Richard Chase and the staff at Wilder Research are available on a fee basis to process the completed tools and prepare a customized report highlighting and interpreting the results.

### TOOL OPTIONS AT A GLANCE

Use the tools once to assess the current level of:

- child development
- program quality
- family and community engagement from the perspective of family and community knowledge systems

Use the tools repeatedly to assess improvements over time.

A manual explains how to:

- administer the tools
- process the data
- interpret the results

## For more information



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Betty Emarita is an ideation and strategic change consultant. A member of

the National Network of Consultants to Grant Makers, she is certified in Human Systems Dynamics and part of the Polarity Management international learning community. For over two decades, Ms. Emarita and associates have provided services, including strategic planning, evaluations, assessments, and training to clients including the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Ford Foundation; Minnesota Department of Human Services; Washington State Department of Early Learning; Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota; and national, statewide, and regional cross-sector collaborations of public agencies, foundations, and nonprofit organizations. She has rich experience incorporating information gathered at the community level into broader state-level systems.

A contributor to the 2012 *Washington State Early Learning Guidelines*, she has also written several publications, including *Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care Best Practices in Five Cultural Communities*; a *Home Visitation Guide to Family, Friend, and Neighbor Caregivers* for Think Small, a services, resources, and advocacy organization for early education in Minnesota, and the Early Childhood Resource and Training Center; and most recently co-authored the BUILD policy brief, *Family and Community Knowledge Systems: New Tools for Engagement*.



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H. Wilder Foundation, studies early childhood policies, services, and indicators and evaluates the effectiveness of school readiness, prevention, and capacity-building programs for children, youth, and families, with a focus on equity and inclusion. For 30 years, Richard has worked with diverse community-based groups and government agencies to design and carry out useful studies focused on outcomes and improvement. Richard has presented nationally and internationally on culture as a protective factor and has written several reports and BUILD Initiative policy briefs on understanding and supporting family, friend, and neighbor caregiving for healthy early childhood development. He also co-authored the BUILD policy brief, *Family and Community Knowledge Systems: New Tools for Engagement*. Richard also directs Wilder's cost-benefit and return on investment studies. Richard has a doctorate in American studies from the University of Minnesota.

## Wilder Research

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