



ENGAGING FAMILIES



In Illinois, many families near or below the poverty line don't enroll their children in early learning programs.

Often, they face obstacles such as language and/or cultural barriers, financial challenges, transportation issues, work schedules, find the enrollment process hard to navigate or are unaware of the benefits of early learning for their children.

You may face the challenge of enrolling and serving more of these children so they receive the benefits that early childhood learning programs provide, including being better prepared to enter kindergarten.

This guide will help you understand the fundamentals of engaging families to help them enroll their children — and children throughout their communities — in quality early learning and development programs.

By building a Peer-to-Peer Pipeline and engaging parents in the Action Learning process, we can learn directly from the Priority Populations we are striving to serve.



Families as equal partners.

Building relationships with families and understanding their needs in our communities is at the heart of early learning and development outreach and recruitment.

One effective way to do this is to engage parents at all levels for their input, their help and their feedback.

- The more families you engage, the more voices will contribute to understanding the system and identifying obstacles related to access.
- Collaborating with families helps you get a better understand of community systems directly from the perspectives of those being served.
- More families will get information and resources about early learning and screening from other families. Families help families.
- Families are the experts about their experiences.

Families as experts and as equal partners

A 2016 research project with Innovation Zones and collaborations showed the impact of engaging families as active partners in decision making. There is no wrong way to connect with families. Go where families are and give them many opportunities to share their voices.

- Families can become involved in problem solving.
- Programs and policies may be improved to accommodate the needs of a community's families.
- Families can provide feedback about the state systems with which they are engaged.
- More effective marketing materials can be created with their input.

Families as equal partners:

Individual Level

Families' voices are heard directly.

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Cafés
- Focus groups
- Kindergarten parent interviews

Local/Community Level

Families involved in deliberate problem solving.

- Decisions about them are decided by them
- Parent participation and voice at work group and exec meetings
 - Parent advisory councils
- Families actively engaged in designing and implementing the solution

Program Level

Families help families.

- Parents volunteer with outreach
 - Parent visibility
- Parent participation at community fairs
 - Door-to-door outreach
 - Picnic events in parks
 - Peer-led parent trainings
 - Tiny habits coaching
 - Facilitate applications
 - Answer questions
- Serve as parent advocates or ambassadors

State Level

Families provide feedback to state systems based on collaboration findings.

- Testimony based on local experience
 - Meeting 1:1 and in groups with policy makers
- Participation in coordinated issue-focused activities

Strategies to bring family voices to inform policy, program and practice.

What is the impact of engaging families directly in the early childhood learning and development system? All this happens when:

Parent voices are heard directly:

- More parent voices contributing to the system scan to identify problems related to access.
- A better understanding of the system from the parents' point of view.

Parents helping parents:

- More parents complete enrollment applications.
- More parents receive information and resources from other parents about early learning, and screening.
- More children receive developmental screening.
- More parents bring their children to school.

Parents involved in deliberate problem solving:

- WIC office hours changed to accommodate parent schedules.
- Collaboration changed outreach approach based on parent feedback.
- Screening and outreach became more effective.
- More children screened and enrolled in early learning programs.
- More effective marketing materials created.
- 1-888- kids hotline created with seamless referral to 311.

Parents provide feedback to state systems based on collaboration findings:

- Led to restoration of some early childhood funding.
- State senator learned about home visiting and impact of budget impasse on program and was impressed.

Common obstacles to engaging families.

Engaging families can be challenging for many reasons. Some of the common obstacles in this work are:

- A lack of time, resources and capacity of early childhood providers to support parents.
- The complexity of the early childhood system.
- Professional training does not always prepare the field for direct engagement with families.
- Programs are eager but may be unsure where to start.



Building a Peer-to-Peer Pipeline



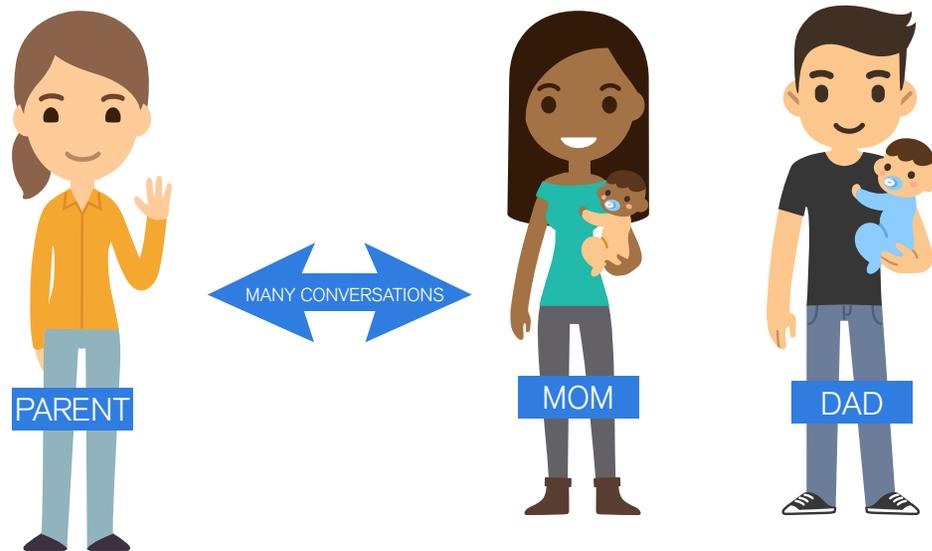
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Strategy idea

Peer-to-peer pipelines let us connect directly — and build relationships — with Priority Population families in our communities.

By building relationships with parents, we can further engage them in helping share valuable childhood learning and development information with other parents. They can begin to engage and help raise awareness among other families during their day-to-day lives.



What is a peer-to-peer pipeline?

Many of us are motivated by peer or social experiences. These moments may also serve as helpful reminders.

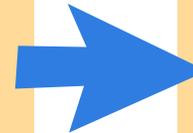
Often, families are more familiar — and already have a foundation of trust — with other parents who share children of similar ages, have had similar life experiences and live in the same community.

Using this trust within the community, families you may not normally be able to reach can be encouraged to begin exploring early learning opportunities with you and your collaboration.

Why should you build peer-to-peer pipelines?



By building relationships with parents, you can increase awareness and enlist them as ambassadors for your early learning program.



Increasing access to and enrollment of children from Priority Populations in quality early learning programs.

Why should you build peer-to-peer pipelines?

Effective family engagement outreach pipelines will help you **build relationships and trust**.

Families are part of the community in ways that providers are not.

By connecting with the families you are striving to serve, **you can make them equal partners in their children's school success**.

Parents and caregivers often know and trust other parents and caregivers because of their shared experiences and needs.

Connecting parents to one another, building relationships with families — and engaging them — helps **strengthen your outreach efforts**.

Why should you build peer-to-peer pipelines?

With peer-to-peer pipelines you are able to reach more kids and families through trusted parents and caregivers within your community.

Most importantly, effective peer-to-peer pipelines will help achieve the goal of enrolling and serving more children from Priority Populations.

Peer-to-peer is also about parents learning from each other and building networks of support. Together, families form stronger social capital, creating impact for their children together.

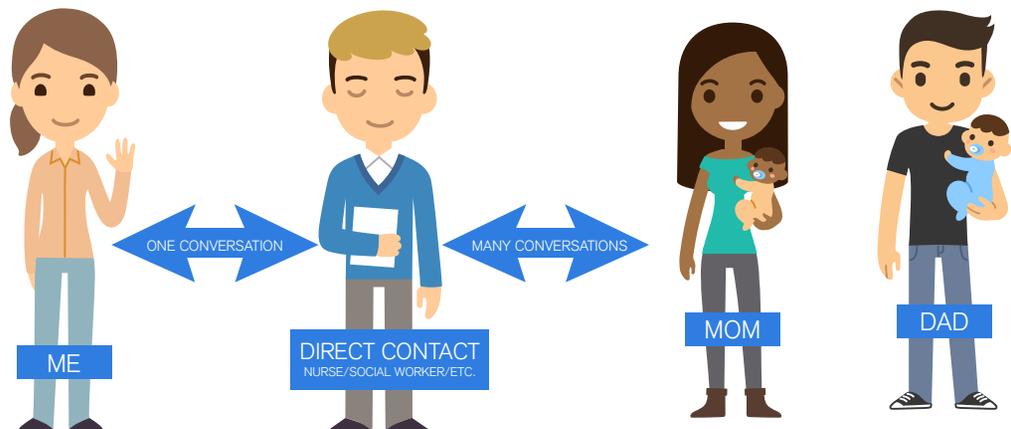


How can you build peer-to-peer pipelines?

Several strategies have proven successful for other early childhood learning and development collaborations. You can try these too!

Create a “Parent Ambassador” program. Parents in your community are already experts at getting to know other families. Through their own experiences, they know what works best in connecting with parents. It is because of their community knowledge and relationships that they can help enroll, conduct outreach, and share resources and supports.

Do they need more supports? Ask the parents what would help them!



How can you build peer-to-peer pipelines?

Help your Parent Ambassadors make Community Connections. Engage parents to help other parents connect with school leadership, Parent Advisory Councils and other community agencies. They can help build social capital and increase identification, recruitment and enrollment of children from the Priority Population.

Engage parents at “Pop-Up Preschools”. At these events, staff can demonstrate early learning experiences in non-traditional locations (i.e. parks, laundromats, etc.) to increase identification of eligible children, recruit and enroll them.

Work with your local child care resource and referral agency to look at data for the community. This will help you see where there may be gaps or opportunities. Ask their help to reach out to families that would be interested in attending a “Pop-Up Preschool”.

Our goal is to **engage effectively** with families in our community and, together, connect more children to high quality early learning experiences.

We want to empower parents to share their perspectives, **talk to other parents** to help connect children from Priority Populations to high quality early learning and development programs, and become involved in decision making processes.

We want parents to be active and empowered.

The parents we want to engage are very busy individuals. Before we can ask for their input and help, we need to engage them in a partnership.

We do that by first getting to know them.

Let's see how addressing three common issues can get us closer to engaging parents as we build an effective peer-to-peer pipeline in our community.

Our goal is to **engage effectively** with families in our community.

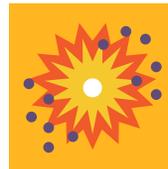
For a parent engage with us, they must:



REMEMBER WHEN to work with us.
(Reminder)



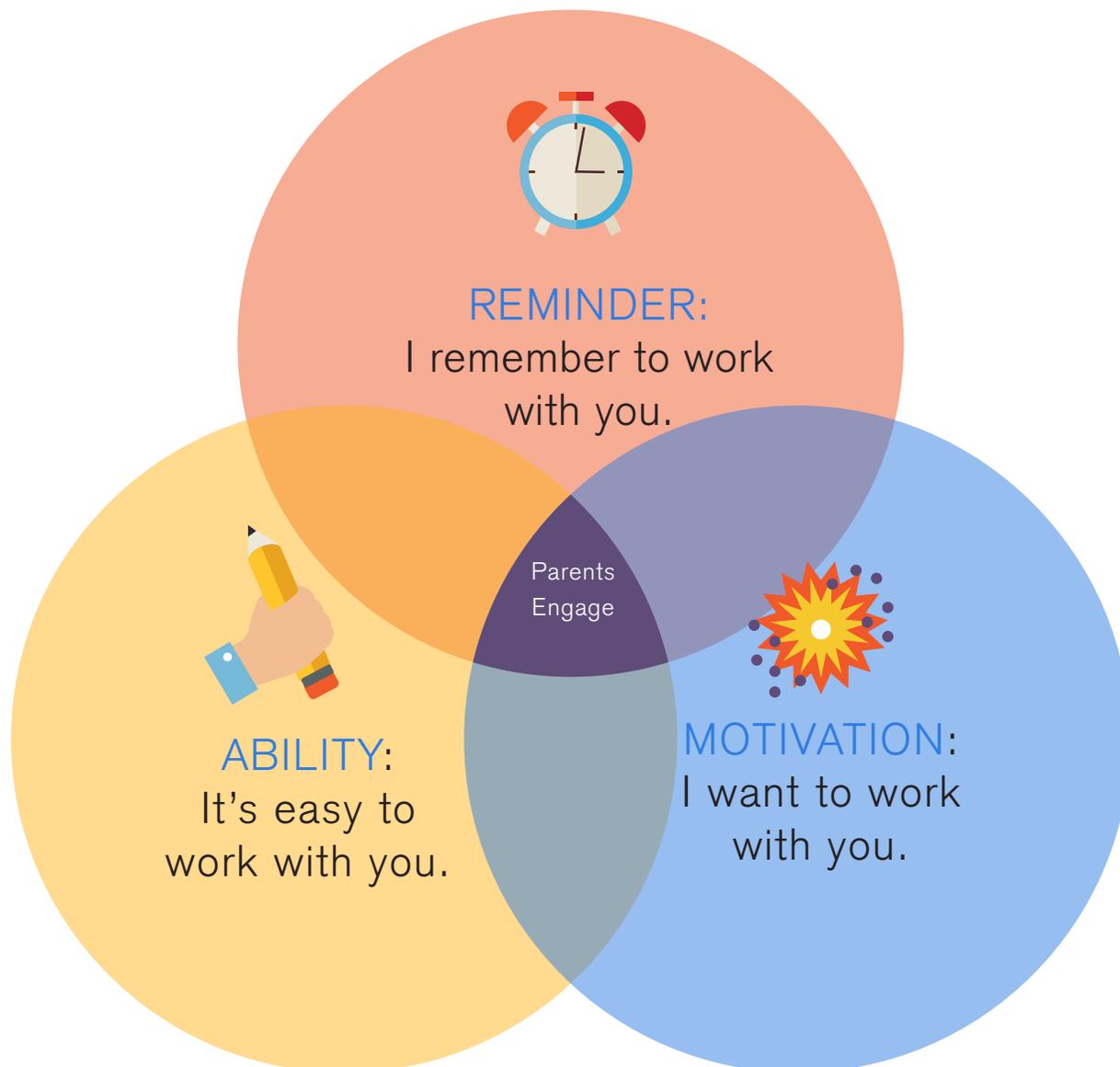
KNOW HOW to work with us.
(Ability)



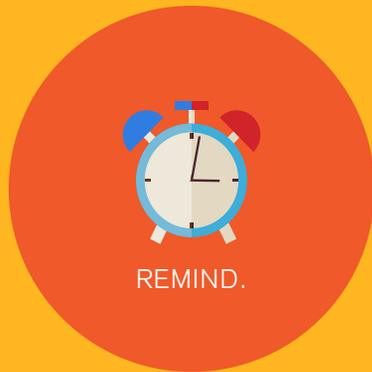
WANT TO work with us.
(Motivation)

(For more information, see the [Understanding Behavior guide](#))

Adapted from BJ Fogg.



How can we help a parent participate in our peer-to-peer pipeline?



Remind parents when it is time for them to act.

Help parents remember to participate by sending a **well-timed reminder** — both in advance of and at the time the activity should take place.

Effective reminders include:

- Text messaging
- A parent information table at school drop-off or pick-up
- Community newsletters, church bulletins, laundry bulletin boards.

Use a reminder that will work best for **THAT** parent at a time when they are motivated to act.

You can create a reminder connected to a parent's existing routine. For example, "When I visit with other families who have young children, then I will hand them the business card of an early learning partner."

(For more information, see the [Understanding Behavior guide](#))

How can we make it easy for parents to work with us?



We can help make our collaboration easier by sharing a clear Vision, offering easy tools or helpful resources, and **making the process really easy.**

We can ask parents **what would make it easier for them** to help us reach out to other parents.

Create small ways for them to engage:

- Through social media
- At events where they will already be (before school pick-up time, for example)
- When their children are participating in an activity.

And make sure your efforts are **close to where they live**, walking distance is best.

**Help people do what they already want to do.
Make it easy!**

(For more information, see the [Understanding Behavior guide](#))

How can we spark a parent's motivation to work with us?



Motivation is difficult to change. It is unique to each individual, but we can **spark motivation**.

We can also **ask them how they feel** about working together and see **where we can be responsive**.

When they are motivated — during back-to-school season, for example — we can ask more of them.

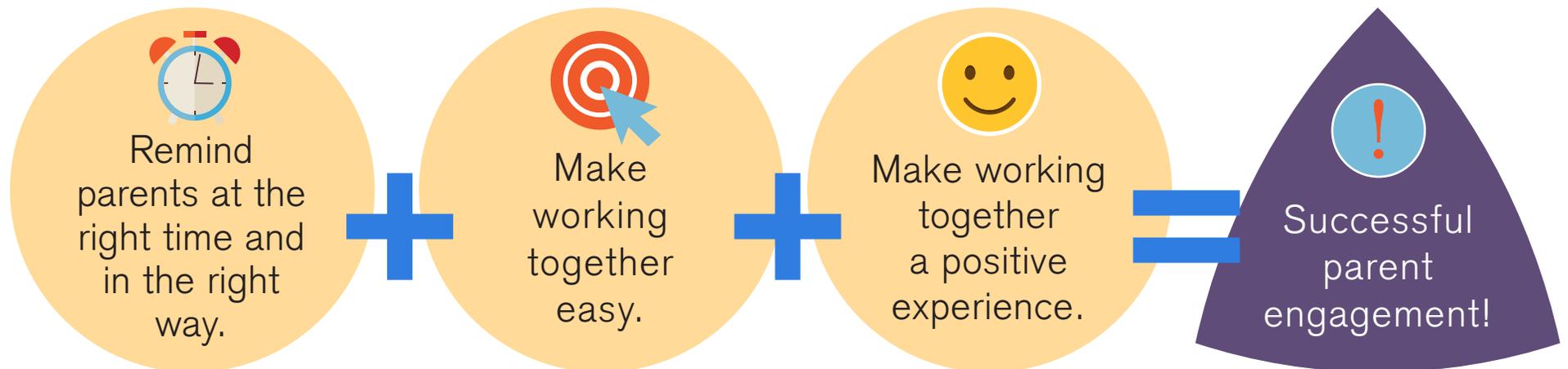
When people are tired, fatigued, managing personal stressors then we need to ask less of them — and make what we do ask **as simple to do as possible**.

Celebrate the small wins — bring other parents along to create a sense of belonging — and **always be encouraging**.

Emotions create habits. Keep it happy!

(For more information, see the [Understanding Behavior guide](#))

Successfully engaging parents means we:



So, what
can we do
right now
to encourage
parents to
engage with
us?

- Ask: What is hard, what would **make it easier**?
- Make every interaction as **positive an experience as possible** for them.
- Make your meetings interactive, positive and connected to a **sense of community belonging**.
- Make it **as easy as possible** for parents to engage with us.
- Remind parents when it's time for action using the method that is **best for THEM**.



How do you know if you've addressed the needs of parents to support collaborating with you?

- Stay in touch and ask. Questions often arise when starting a new process.
- Be available to respond to questions and concerns.
- Try small tests, or Experiments, to see what works — go and see! (Experiments are just fun, small tests you do together to see what works — and what doesn't.)
- Keep track of all the obstacles you hear about or experience (large and small). Make adjustments as needed based on successes and what you learn together.



(For more information, see the [Action Learning Guide](#).)

Engaging Parents in Action Learning



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What is Action Learning*?

Action Learning is an **outcomes-oriented improvement process** that uses data to identify needs, match solutions, plan, evaluate and reflect using a series of small, iterative experimental cycles.

With Action Learning, you **discover, plan, do, learn and repeat** the process until you reach the goal you are working toward.

A big part of this process is **using data and user experiences** to work toward your Vision. Engaging the parents you are striving to serve — collecting information and learning about their experiences — can enhance your Action Learning work.

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can engaging parents improve Action Learning?

Data provides the foundation for implementing Action Learning methods. It involves four steps:

1 Identify your Vision.

2 Grasp the Current Condition.

3 Establish your Next Target Condition.

4 Conduct Small Experiments to get there (plan, do, check, act).

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can engaging parents improve Action Learning?

The problems we are trying to address through small Experiments often have a direct impact on the families in our communities with **Priority Population children who need early learning opportunities.**

Data-informed decision making is more effective than guessing. Gathering information directly from those impacted by our work can help us better understand what is going on NOW — and identify what needs be improved in our community system.



(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can engaging parents improve Action Learning?

Engaging with families during the Action Learning process helps bring families into the decision making process in several ways:

- Input from families is important to making sure **their voices are reflected** in understanding the current and desired situations.
- Families bring diverse perspectives to the problems you're addressing and to **helping identify possible solutions**.
- Families can tell us if materials are difficult to understand, too complex or contain unfamiliar jargon.
- It is important to **know our audience** (get out of the building), and talk with families we are trying to reach.
- Families get information from other families — they know how to talk to one another, and **can be powerful influencers** when we involve them in our work.

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)



**KEEP
CALM**

AND

**GET OUT OF
THE BUILDING**

How can you engage parents in your Action Learning process?

Begin by defining WHY you want to engage families in Action Learning:

- What do you want to learn from families?
- How will this information be used?
- Who will use this information?

What are you trying to accomplish in gathering this data?

- Better understanding of their experiences?
- Better understanding of problems and barriers impacting enrollment?
- Better understanding of the community/system conditions affecting families?

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can you engage parents in your Action Learning process?

Determine WHO you will reach out to.

Which families in your community do you want to gather this information from?

Consider:

- Isolated families not enrolled in early childhood learning and development.
- The ages of their children.
- The genders of their children.
- Sexual identity.
- The family's race and ethnicity.
- Where they live.
- What kind of household they have (i.e. single parent, grandparents raising kids, etc.).
- Their current connections to other services.
- Their income level.
- Families from Priority Populations (homeless, child welfare involved, teen parents).

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can you engage parents in your Action Learning process?

Next, think about WHERE you can go to reach these families:

- Homes
- Doctor offices
- Health clinics
- Grocery stores
- Businesses
- Parks
- Community meetings
- Social service agencies
- Schools
- Parent meetings
- Faith-based centers
- Libraries.

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can you engage parents in your Action Learning process?

Consider HOW you can collect the information you need from families. Techniques include:

- **Just ask.** Have individuals with direct contact with families (e.g. home visitation workers, preschool teachers, health care workers, hairdressers) ask your questions of families.
- **Intake forms.** Add your questions to existing intake forms or questionnaires families are already required to complete when entering or exiting a service.
- **Waiting rooms.** Have a representative ask your questions of families in a waiting room or upon entering or exiting a service. The person asking questions can use a clipboard to hold the surveys as they go from family to family.

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How can you engage parents in your Action Learning process?

- **Comment boxes.** Create a written survey, leave them with pencils and a box for families to drop their responses into.
- **Agenda items.** Ask for time on the agenda of an existing parent or community meeting.
- **Set up a booth.** At local events, set up a booth where families can get information about your services and you can ask your questions.
- **Family surveys.** Create a survey for families to complete. Ask several different collaboration partners within your community to distribute the survey to the families they support. Remember to keep it short and simple.

(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

How Will YOU Collect Information?

What's the best method to get the information you want?

Considerations include:

- How much TIME will it take?
- What will it COST?
- How will you get ACCESS to the families?
- Make sure your method achieves the goals of the information you need.
- How MANY families should you ask?
- How will you assure CONFIDENTIALITY to those who participate?



(*See the [Action Learning Guide](#) for details about using this methodology.)

Here is a sample tool you can use to track information you gather from families in your community.

Sample Tracking tool

1

Identifier
(Ms. J, or mom with 3 kids under 5)

2

Address/ Location
(blue house on the corner of Main St.)

3

Age of child/children

4

"I really want to send child to an early learning program"
1=Yes! 2=Maybe 3=No!

5

"It is really easy to send my child to an early learning program"
1=Yes! 2=Maybe 3=No!

6

"This is what would help me enroll my child in an early learning program"
(write response)

Track information using this tool.

1

Identifier

- Include the stakeholder group who gave you the information with a general description for privacy.

2

Address/location

- Include the address or location of the person who provided the information.

3

Age of child/children

- Include age of child/children.
- Ask: How old is your child?
In months and years.

4

I really want to send my child to an early learning program.

1=Yes! Really wants to send.

2=Maybe Not so sure.

3=No! Not at all.

If they respond “maybe” or “no,” try to ask more questions.

- “Tell me more.”

- “What would make it easier?”

- “What do you need to know that would help make it easier?”

5

It is really easy to send my child to an early learning program.

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If they respond “maybe” or “no,” ask more questions.

- “Tell me more.”

- “What would make it easier?”

- “What do you need to know that would help make it easier?”

6

This is what would help me enroll my child in an early learning program.

Here are some other questions you could ask:

- “What is hard about enrolling your child in a high quality early learning program?”

- “Why do you think families find it hard to enroll in early learning programs in our community?”

- “What programs, supports, or services would help make it easier to enroll?”

- “What can be done to make our early learning programs easier for families to access?”

You've collected information from families in your community.
Now what do you do with it?

Once the
data has been
collected....

Review the information with your collaboration.

Sort the information by:

- Stakeholder group
- Theme area
- Similar ideas

Then talk about what you can reasonably do.

Make this an ongoing part of your meetings to get better at helping families to enroll.

Find out what is hard for families, then work together to plan how to overcome each barrier by making it easier.

Include parents in this process as well!

We have a few tips that
may help you...

“This is what would help me enroll my child in an early learning program.”

Bring the data to your work group and **ask**:

“If you could wave a magic wand to get **anyone** [the schools or programs or child care centers or the local collaboration] to do **anything** to make enrolling in school easier, what would you have them do (from now on, one time, for a period of time)?

- Ask all to write ideas down on sticky notes.
- Use the data collected to come up with ideas!
- Give them 2-3 minutes to think about ideas.
- Read aloud and put on flip chart paper.
- “Great, and what else...”

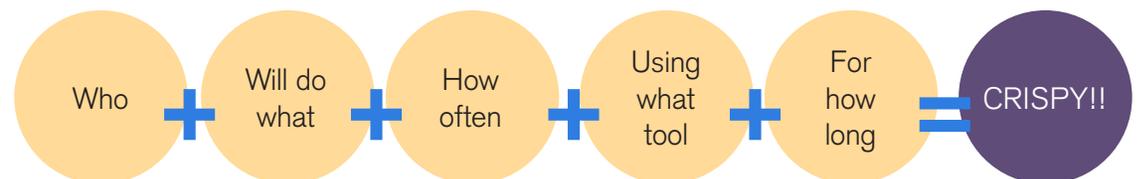
“This is what would help me enroll my child in an early learning program.”

You can do this next step as the magic wand ideas are read aloud, or as the next exercise...

- This is called “crispifying” ideas.
- “Let’s make the ideas more clear.”
- Use this template to make the ideas “crispy” or more clear:

Who (actor) + **is doing what** (verb)+ **how often**, how long, or both (duration) + **using what** method or tool (technique)?

- This will help everyone understand the same ideas in the same way.



This is what
would help
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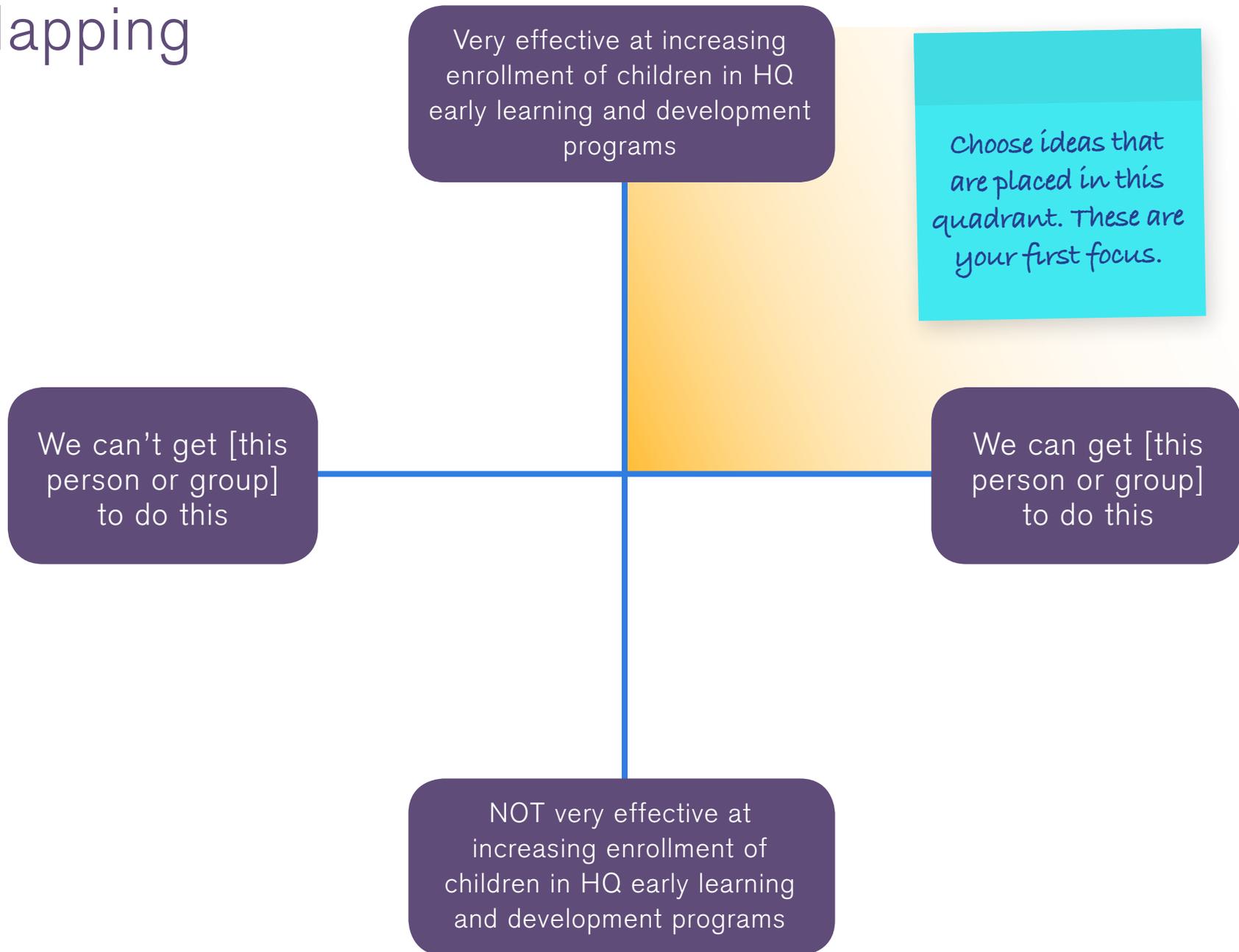
This is where it gets fun....(see the next slide for a picture)

Next, move the sticky notes around and rank ideas.

- **First, for each idea**, ask the group if it would be very effective at achieving your goal. **Move ideas up and down. These are magic wand ideas. Don't worry if the ideas are possible.**
- **Second**, for each idea ask the group if we can get so-and-so to do that. **Move ideas left to right based on whether the answer is yes or no.**
- **Third**, look at the ideas together. **Are they clear? Do we agree with where the ideas are placed? Move the ideas around until you all agree.**

Select the top 2-3 ideas **from the top right corner.**

Focus Mapping



Create a plan together.

Lead the team in a discussion

- Great, now how do we make these ideas a reality?
- Break it out, step by step.

Keep it simple.

Here are some ideas:

- Reduce barriers by bringing services to families or shortening forms to save time.
- Provide a tool or resource to make the steps to enrollment easier to understand.
- Offer more enrollment sites. Try co-locating with a partner in public housing or healthcare.
- Keep language simple and clear. If it looks complex, it will feel complex.
- Encourage celebration of each small win.
- Write a step-by-step plan together with the family.
- Reward each small step of target action.
- Connect reminders to current routines — “when I..., then I...”

In 2012, Illinois was awarded a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant to strengthen early childhood systems and kindergarten readiness for Illinois children. Illinois Action for Children in partnership with the Office of Early Childhood and Development coordinated statewide Innovation Zone activities to help the state test strategies to increase the enrollment of children with very high needs in high quality early learning and development programs. Illinois Action for Children supported each Innovation Zone in planning and implementing activities. The Innovation Zone model uses action learning cycles, an iterative process, to quickly learn and adapt strategies for immediate use in each community.

www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/



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