



## Trauma-Responsive Resilience Building Family Engagement Strategies

Julie Nicholson, Julie Kurtz, LaWanda Wesley and Hannah Shack

**Learn the difference between family involvement and family engagement.** Although parents and families benefit from both forms of interaction, we want to strive for engagement. Specifically, build trusting relationships with families through listening, sharing power and decision-making with them and striving to create collaborative partnerships.

**Understand the impact of stress and trauma on adults' behavior.** All behavior has meaning and dysregulated behavior tells a story about how an adult is feeling and what they need. When an adult has a trauma reminder (trigger) and displays a fight, flight or freeze response, their behavior is communicating, "I am scared", "I don't feel safe" and/or "I feel a sense of powerlessness and loss of control." Use strategies to manage your own stress and reactivity so you can respond with a desire to understand which leads to building empathy.

**Remember the power of your mirror neurons.** Stress is "contagious" so if you are working with a parent or family member whose stress response system has been activated, it is critical that you remain calm. Their mirror neurons will imitate what they see, hear, and feel, modelled by you. Remind yourself, "When in the presence of a distressed and dysregulated adult, I can either follow them into a state of dysregulation (mirroring their stress response system) or lead them back into regulation" (staying calm and altering their emotional and physical state to match my own).

**Use a strength-based approach to all communication and interactions with families.** Recognize every family has strengths, knowledge, capacities and sources of pride you can learn about and acknowledge in your program. Show curiosity to listen and learn from families about their ideas, goals, desires, worries and solutions in relation to their child's learning and development in your care. Engage in two-way communication that demonstrates that you value each family's expertise about their child.

**Use brain-based communication strategies that buffer adults' stress.** When an adult is in the right side of their brain (emotions rise up and/or become too big or dysregulated), help them calm by listening and validating their feelings and/or guiding them to talk about what is distressing. Connect with the adult's emotional state first before you expect them to respond to your requests/demands, to listen to another perspective, to show empathy or engage in logical reasoning and problem-solving.

**Provide a sense of community and belonging and connect families to social supports.** Build a sense of community by inviting families to co-plan or lead meaningful events as this will support them to feel a genuine sense of belonging and connection. School administrators can help families find such social supports in the community as food pantries, family play groups, information on affordable housing, child care, mental health services, job training, diaper distribution sites or faith-based organizations.

**Be curious and seek to understand a family's language and cultural values and beliefs.** Show interest in learning about a family's home language and the cultural values and beliefs that are important to them. Create meaningful opportunities for children and families to learn about one another and discover common interests emphasizing feelings of pride, acceptance, open-mindedness, and discovery.