

When Working With Parenting Adults Search Institute Asks Us to Consider:

1. Instead of messaging to families, start with listening to families

In too many cases, efforts to engage families begin with policy makers, researchers, and professionals determining what families need to do, and then developing messages that will generate “buy-in,” support, and participation. But whenever we authentically take time to listen to and build an understanding of parenting adults and children through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and other methods, we are much more likely to abandon simplistic stereotypes or untested assumptions and partner with them in ways that are more meaningful and effective.

2. Instead of providing programs for families, emphasize building relationships with families

Educators, social workers, and other professionals who successfully engage families point to the need to build trust and relationships as a foundation for engaging them. In other words, “Parents don’t care what you know until they know that you care.”

3. Instead of negative stereotypes, highlight strengths in families

As a society, we hold onto a number of myths or preconceptions about families. For example, we assume that families who don’t show up don’t care, when the evidence consistently shows that the vast majority of parenting adults do care, even if some don’t express it effectively. We can counteract the negative stereotypes and create a different cultural narrative about the strengths of all types of families and their contributions to our communities and society.

4. Instead of giving families expert advice about what to do, encourage parents to try new approaches to relationships

Developmental relationships form and grow through everyday interactions that occur over time. But families across the spectrum fall into patterns or habits that can be counterproductive—whether it’s the ways they do or don’t show affection, how they praise or encourage each other, or the ways they keep or share power in family life. One way schools and youth-serving organizations can begin helping families build developmental relationships is to invite them to try out some new practices or activities that introduce or align with the core actions in the developmental relationships framework.

5. Instead of focusing on parenting as a set of techniques, emphasize parenting as primarily a relationship

Judging from social media, TV talk shows, and bookstore shelves, the secret of parenting is to master a set of techniques or strategies that shape or control a child’s behaviors. But we join with other researchers who have argued that, at its core, parenting is a relationship rooted in mutual affection, attachment, and influence that occur between parenting adult and child.

6. Instead of building coalitions of formal systems to support children’s success, broaden coalitions to include families

Many worthwhile efforts are underway to help all children succeed. Most of those partnerships are focused on achieving specific goals. Although those are good goals and contain many of the right participants, families are often the missing piece of the strategy. Supporting parents in building developmental relationships within and beyond their families that benefit their children is a strategy that has untapped potential to help children succeed in school and in life.

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