# **Chapter 2: Fostering Family Engagement: What is Engagement and What are the Benefits of Being Engaged**

**Introduction:** Engagement is when we ALL work together toward your child’s success in learning and in life. When you and your child’s school or community partner work together, your child will be set up for success in healthy development, school readiness, and overall well-being, and you will build positive relationships with people who work with your child.

## Definitions:

* **Family:** Families provide support, love, and care, and a sense of belonging by providing social, emotional, physical, and other support to each other.  Family includes parents, brothers, sisters, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, and others who share responsibility and support for each other.
* **Family Engagement:** Family Engagement is a shared accountability where schools and other community agencies and organizations reach out to work with families in meaningful ways and where families actively support their children's learning and development from birth to adulthood.
* **Professional:** A professional is a member of a profession who has special experience and expertise in their area of practice. A professional is someone whose job requires special education, training, and skill and who is subject to standards and ethics in their field.
* **Team:** A team is a group of diverse individuals, all working together for a common purpose. The individuals on a team should have common goals and objectives and work together toward achieving those goals.

## What Families Should Expect:

* You have the right to be at the table and included in your child’s education and services. You should expect that the schools and agencies serving your child actively work with you to make sure you understand the services they are providing and have the information and support you need to participate fully in decisions about your child. You should ask questions and ask for help if you are not able to participate because of a knowledge, language, or other access barrier.

## What Families Want Their Team Members to Know:

* Challenges like a lack of transportation or childcare, and the demands of my job can make it hard for me to participate in meetings about my child.  This does not mean I am not engaged in my child’s education or services.  It means my life is hectic and you can help me participate by giving me timely notice of meetings and scheduling them around my schedule.
* Past experiences where information was not provided to me in a timely way or in a language I understand has made it hard for me to participate in my child’s education and service planning.  When I don’t have all of the information I need about my child, I can’t help the team make good decisions for my child.  You can help me be a more active team member by making sure I have access to all of the information I need to participate.
* When information is not provided to me, or it is provided in a way that does not make me feel included (not in my native language, not accessible) I do not feel a sense of belonging in the school or service community. This makes me less able to communicate and participate in my child’s education or services because I feel shut out of the process and feel my participation is not valued.  You can help me participate by asking me if I am getting the information and support I need to be an active team member.

## What Professionals Want Families to Know:

* Sometimes we don’t have the information we need to fully engage you in the team process.  You can help us make team meetings easier for you by letting us know what you need to understand and participate in the process.  This includes reminding us to explain the unfamiliar terms we are using, provide you with any accommodations that will help you participate, and schedule enough time to discuss your concerns. You can help us do this by letting us know ahead of meetings what you need to participate and what you want to discuss.
* It is important to keep an open mind about how we provide services to your child because often there are several appropriate ways to address your child’s needs. You can help us find a solution by providing us with information you have about your child’s needs, engaging in team discussions, and providing feedback on the options discussed.

### **Family Checklist:**

* Have I asked and been provided with the information I need to fully participate in my child’s services/meetings?
* Do my child’s school and service providers have my accurate contact information and my schedule of availability?
* Am I aware of what my nonverbal body language is saying? Am I aware of any emotions that I am feeling (e.g., fear, uncertainty, intimidation), but am not sharing?
* Do I communicate with my child’s team and respond to them in a timely manner? Have I let the team know my preferred method(s) of communication or what would make it easier for me?
* If I have questions/goals/outcomes for my child’s team, have I written those down or emailed them for clarification/understanding?
* Do I participate with the understanding that I am an important member in my child’s team?

## Professional Checklist:

* Do I communicate with families with enough planning ahead of time so that they can participate in their child’s services/meetings?
* Do I understand family barriers to participation and plan meeting dates, times, and locations/modalities with those barriers in mind?
* Do I let families know to ask for accommodations if they need them to participate in services/meetings?
* Do I provide the accommodations that families need to participate in services/meetings?
* Am I aware of what my nonverbal body language is saying?
* Do I provide services to families with an understanding of their culture/community norms? Have I asked the families about their norms or have I made assumptions?
* Do I actively listen to family input and concerns?