Parents as Teachers ™

Guidance for Using the Group Connection Planning Guide and Record

Group connections are a powerful way to present additional information and build partnerships with families. Gathering as a group helps families develop friendships, form new support networks, share common experiences, and discover new ideas for addressing the day-to-day challenges of parenting.

Group connection schedules are often developed across a full program year. The *Group Connection Planning Guide* and *Record* is used to document the specific plan and delivery of each session.

While group connections will vary in format, size, topic, location, and frequency, each should include one or more area of emphasis (parent-child interaction, development-centered parenting, and family well-being). Each group connection should also have a specific intent. The topics, subtopics, and key points will flow from the area of emphasis and the intent.

In order to ensure that a large percentage of parents will be interested in attending a group connection, consideration should be given to parents' interests, family needs (as determined by aggregate analysis of assessments), goals, child screening data, and the group's attendance history for similar topics, if this is available.

The *Group Connection Planning Guide and Record* may be adapted or combined with existing forms (for example, in blended programs) as long as all of the information on this PAT version is included. Affiliate programs will find more about essential information in the *Model Implementation Guide* and in the *Quality Assurance Guidelines*, which can be downloaded from the portal.

Group connection data

This box includes information related to the planning process and logistics. In addition to the guidance around setting the stage provided in this resource, parent educators may wish to use the *Checklist for Preparing the Group Connection Planning Guide and Record* as they move closer to the date of the group connection and their planning becomes more specific.

Parents are more likely to attend a meeting if they think its **title** sounds catch, clever, playful, interesting, or relevant to their lives. At the same time, it is important that the title clearly explain what parents can expect to gain from the group connection – especially when it is a presentation about a developmental or family well-being topic.

If a **presenter or community representative** will be speaking, it is important to develop a plan and confirm the details in plenty of time. Programs will usually be responsible for inquiring about and fulfilling the speaker's audiovisual needs, room set-up requirements, and expectations of responsibility. In addition, there may be considerations around cost and availability of desired speakers. In turn, programs will need to be very clear about the date, time, location, and desired content.

Consider using parents as a resource to help identify topics, to plan, to facilitate, and even to present at group connections.

The planning guide is designed to be flexible enough for use in any of these **formats**:

> Family activity
> Presentation
> Ongoing group
> Community event
> Parent café

The choice of area(s) of emphasis, intent, topics, and audience makeup (parents only, parents and children, babies vs. older children) will help determine the format. The possibilities within each format can be very dynamic. For example, a group connection focused on relaxation through baby massage could have a very different look and feel from one about developing fine motor skills through finger painting and other messy play, yet both could be successful group connections in the family activity format. Two or more formats can be integrated to foster family involvement and to best serve the needs of a program's parents and children.

Once a format is chosen, it will have implications for the number and type of learning activities offered, facilitation strategies, materials and supplies, and parent handouts, as well as the budget, staffing, and number of families expected.

When choosing the **date and time**, consider the needs of the population and community. Some parents may prefer daytime events; others may be limited to evenings or weekends due to their work schedules. The date should be set far enough in advance to allow for:

> Scheduling the venue.
> Arranging child care.
> Reserving equipment.
> Scheduling speakers or facilitators.
> Promoting the event among parents.
> Copying handouts.
> Obtaining fliers.
> Purchasing or procuring incentives, materials, and refreshments.
> Rescheduling due to weather, holidays, seasonal festivals, community gatherings, or sporting events.

Location is perhaps one of the most complex factors in planning a successful group connection. In addition to the availability of the facility on the preferred date, it's a good idea to consider:

> Cost
> Parking and public transportation access
> Permits or written requests for permission (for example, to reserve a city park shelter)
> The desired room's size, lighting, noise level, heating, and cooling

> Schedule constraints before and after the time slot
> Personnel to help gain access to the building and close up afterward
> Custodial services
> Ability to rearrange furniture or reconfigure the room as needed
> Permission to post signs
> Baby-changing stations and restrooms
> Audio-visual equipment, electricity, sound systems, wireless Internet, or other technology
> Safety of the room and surrounding area
> Feasibility of doing the desired activities in the space available
> Flexibility in case of inclement weather

Many factors can impact the **number of families and children** who attend group connections. Busy families find the date and time important, of course, but they also look closely at the intent and topic(s) when deciding whether or not to attend. The number of parents attending can also vary depending on the location (both the venue and the room), ease of transportation and parking, accessibility, child care, incentives, attendance prizes, and refreshments or meals.

Whether or not to provide **child care** is optional, but it is important to consider it in planning group connections. Unless the format is a family activity, it is usually beneficial to offer child care so that the maximum number of parents can attend.

Appropriately planned child care should be based on a program's regulations and take into consideration the format chosen, availability of supervision, age-appropriate toys and materials, adequate space, and overall safety.

It will be important to visit the room to be used for child care to gauge its cleanliness, appropriateness for young children, and proximity to the adult meeting room. Having a restroom nearby is also a good idea when the group includes toddlers and preschoolers.

Publicity should explain what families will be able to experience and what benefits there are for attending (incentives or meals, for example). One of the best (and low-cost!) strategies for encouraging parents to attend is having parent educators or other parents personally invite them. It is also important to share information through a wide variety of outlets, including newsletters, e-mails, community calendars, fliers, phone calls, social media postings, and marquees. Which channels of publicity are chosen depends on a program's budget, targeted audience, and resources.

Incentives and refreshments are popular at group connections. If incentives will be offered, choose them based on program regulations, cost, number of families expected, family cultures, and other available resources. Plan for refreshments based on rules for the program and venue, cost, number of families expected, and target ages of children. Keep possible allergies in mind.

Activities, presentations, discussions, or events

It is not necessary to address all three **areas of emphasis** during a group connection, but parent educators may choose to address more than one, depending on the format.

The **intent** of a group connection could include:

> Enhancing parents' knowledge of child development and parenting issues by providing information about parenting skills, parent-child interactions, child development, and community resources.

> Providing opportunities for parents to meet together, share experiences, and support each other.

> Providing structured activities to promote knowledge related to parenting and child development.

> Offering opportunities for parents to observe their children with other children.

> Encouraging participation in outings and events in community settings.

> Addressing parents' questions and concerns.

> Providing a forum for parents to discuss matters involving their families and communities.

Topics and key points can come from parent educator resources in the *Foundational Curriculum* or from other high-quality sources of information. This content may also come from presenters or community representatives.

Prompts and questions invite input from the whole group. They encourage parents to share information, ideas, opinions, experiences, observations, and feelings – all of which can make the group more effective.

In an effort to convey information so that all types of learners are engaged, it is important to vary the types of **learning activities** within a group connection. The more opportunities parents have to apply the information they have learned, the more meaningful and useful the information becomes.

Likewise, **facilitation strategies** should take into account participants' diverse learning preferences in order to ensure that the chosen format works well for everyone.

Examples include:

> Open-ended questions
> Opportunities to share information, ideas, opinions, experiences, observations, and feelings
> Active listening
> Coaching
> Connections from experiences and activities to child development and parenting information
> Peer co-facilitators
> Observation by parents during family activities or other times when children are present

More information about choosing learning activities and facilitation strategies is in the resource *Leading Groups* in the *Model Implementation Guide*.

Supplies and materials run the gamut from logistical items – tables, signs, clipboards, checklists, pencils or pens, name tags, name tents, first-aid kits, informational brochures, tape, and power cords – to program-specific paperwork like evaluations, surveys, and sign-in sheets. Making a checklist on the planning guide or elsewhere can be helpful in ensuring everything gets to the group connection site.

Documentation and evaluation

Programs frequently need to record specific information after a group connection to satisfy funding requirements. For that reason, the fields on the customizable *Group Connection Sign-in Sheet* can be changed to gather the data that programs would like to collect – for example, parent educators' names, number of family members attending, or contact information for prospective families. Use the language that's most comfortable for the families attending.

Programs, funders, or partner organizations may have additional forms that need to be completed as well.

Reviewing evaluations such as the *Group Connection Feedback* form can be useful in understanding how successful and impactful parents perceive the group connection to be.