

Family Support Staff and Parent Relationships in Early Childhood Education Settings

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Background: Family engagement in children's early learning is one of the most powerful predictors of children's development (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Strong parent-staff relationships can help encourage parents' involvement in their children's schooling and improve children's school readiness (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003). Early care and education (ECE) programs often meet the family engagement needs of low-income children and families by employing family support staff (FSS). FSS are professionals, usually trained as social workers or in similar family service fields, and are responsible for building relationships with families that enable them to connect families with necessary resources and to integrate families into the school and community (US HHS and DOE, 2017). While research tells us that these relationships are important, there are few widely used measures of relationship quality between FSS and parents.

The Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality Scale (FPTRQ) is a fairly new survey measure of the relationship quality between staff and families in ECE settings (Kim et al., 2015). This measure is comprised of three subscales: Knowledge, Practices, and Attitudes (Table 1), with separate surveys for parents and FSS. The FSS survey measures specific knowledge that staff have about families, interactions with families, and beliefs that inform staff's work with families. The family survey measures how comfortable families are sharing information with their FSS, how FSS have supported families in establishing goals and strategies for their family, and families' perception of their FSS' demeanor and behavior.

Research Questions: At this point, minimal research has been conducted using the FPTRQ. Therefore, our focus is descriptive, with the goal of providing useful information on FPTRQ for practitioners and researchers. We had three main research aims in this study: (1) What kinds of responses did the FPTRQ produce from our sample of FSS and families, and how can we characterize those responses? (2) What are the relations between FSS demographics and characteristics and FPTRQ responses? (3) Is there an association between FSS characteristics and family responses on the FPTRQ?

Setting: Data come from a network of research-based ECE schools. The goal of these programs is to prevent the persistent achievement gap for our nation's most at-risk young children. There are four core pillars of the ECE model: data utilization, embedded professional development, high-quality teaching practices, and intensive family engagement. These features work together in a comprehensive and intentional way to achieve a high-quality early childhood program that helps children from birth to age 5 grow up safe, healthy and eager to learn.

Participants: Data represent 1,282 parents and 79 FSS across 21 ECE sites nationwide. About 6% of mothers were teen moms. Most of the parents in our sample had completed high school, but 14% had not; 40% had completed some college, and 12% had completed college or more.

The ethnic composition of our FSS sample was 52% White, 32% African American, 34% Hispanic, and 6% Other. The sample was 92% Female. About 29% of our FSS spoke a language other than English. FSS average caseload was 33 families. The vast majority of FSS had a college degree and had worked in early care and education for an average of 11 years.

Program: “Family engagement” is defined as partnering with families to build mutually respectful, goal-oriented relationships that support strong parent-child relationships, family well-being, and ongoing learning and development for both parents and children. Each school works to achieve family outcomes by focusing on three principles: (1) promoting the parent-child relationship; (2) promoting the parents’ critical role in the emotional and cognitive development of their children; (3) promoting the parents as an effective advocate on behalf of their child’s education. On average, each school has about three family support staff (FSS) who work full-time with the families to build these important relationships.

Research Design: Data were collected from 21 ECE sites across the United States in the Spring of 2018. Each survey had demographic questions along with the FPTRQ scales. FSS also answered questions about their workplace climate (adapted from the Early Head Start Survey Self-Administered Questionnaire for Staff (1999)) and caseload size. Data were aggregated across all sites. Constructs for the FPTRQ were calculated using the instructions laid out in the manual.

Data Collection and Analysis: Since the main goals of this project were to describe how FPTRQ responses vary based on family or FSS characteristics, we ran descriptive statistics for all the FPTRQ constructs. Then we conducted correlations between demographic characteristics and FPTRQ responses. We also ran a regression to control for site differences.

Preliminary Results: RQ1. In general, parents and FSS responded in the high-range on all the dimensions of the FPTRQ (Figure 1).

RQ2. When FSS report feeling supported, safe, and satisfied with their job, they tend to have stronger positive attitudes toward the families they work with ($r = 0.29-0.35$, $p < .05$). FSS with more years of experience working in Family Support also responded higher on FPTRQ Attitude ($r = .23$, $p < .05$). FSS who have higher caseloads tend to score lower on FPTRQ Knowledge ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$), Practices ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$), and Attitudes ($r = -.28$, $p < .001$) dimensions

RQ3. FSS who screened positively for depression worked with families who reported less positive attitudes toward their FSS ($B = -0.3$, $p < .05$), controlling for site in a multiple regression.

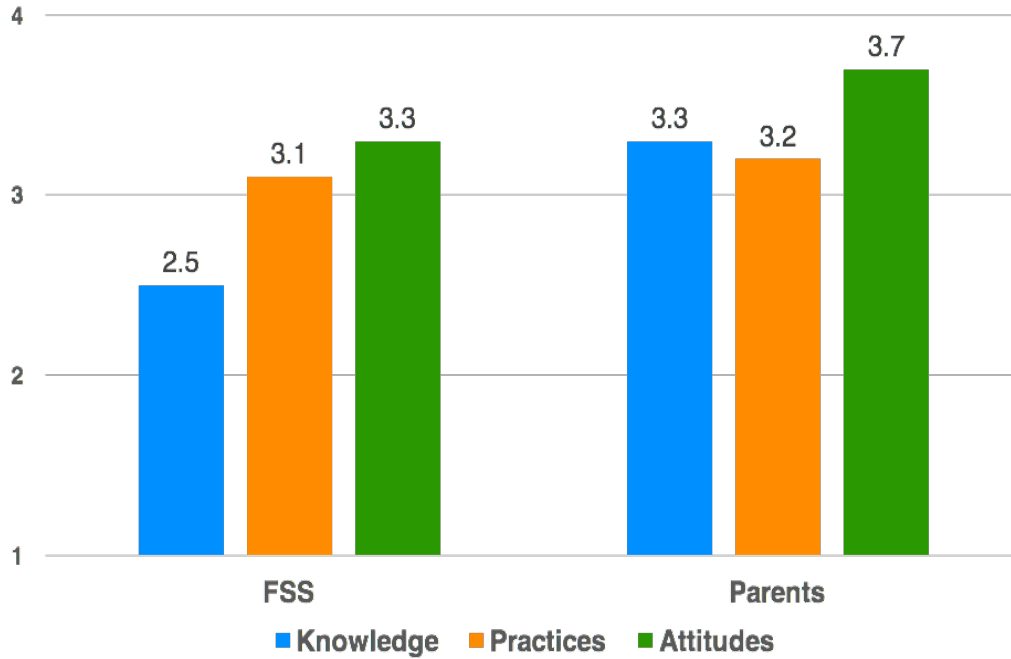
The higher the FSS caseload, the lower the parents rated their relationship on Knowledge ($r = -.12, p < .05$) and Practices ($r = -.12, p < .05$)

Preliminary Conclusions: There are few instruments that measure high-quality family engagement in ECE programs. The FPTRQ is a first step toward achieving a more sophisticated and holistic measure of family relationships with their ECE program. This study is a first pass at understanding the utility of the FPTRQ, especially for research and practice purposes.

Table 1. FPTRQ Constructs for Family Support Staff and parents

Family Support Staff	Parent
Knowledge	
Family-specific knowledge	Family-specific knowledge
Practices	
Collaboration	Collaboration
Responsiveness	Responsiveness
Communication	Communication
Connecting to services	
Family-focused concern	
Attitudes	
Commitment	Commitment
Respect	Respect
Openness to change	Understanding context

Figure 1. Averages on FPTRQ constructs for FSS and Parents



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