

Foundations for Quality Series

# Consumer Engagement



## Using Social Media to Engage Families



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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ADMINISTRATION FOR  
**CHILDREN & FAMILIES**



NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



## Consumer Engagement: Using Social Media to Engage Families

**A national survey conducted in 2015 indicated that 75 percent of parents use social media. Results from this survey also tell us that parents use social media sites for social support and for parenting information** (Pew Research Center, 2015). Data from this survey also indicate that States, Territories, Tribes, and other agencies and individuals responsible for consumer education and engagement, including child care resource and referral agencies, can reach large numbers of diverse families through thoughtful use of social media.

### Introduction

States, Territories, Tribes, and others responsible for providing consumer education and promoting consumer engagement can use social media to partner with families to support their children's learning and development. You can use this guide to assist with

- developing and managing a social media plan;
- identifying audiences and connecting your social media efforts to your mission;
- choosing the best sites and times to post based on your audiences and objectives;
- considering technical requirements, promotion, and quality assurance;
- creating posts that are strengths-based, easy for readers to understand, and culturally and linguistically responsive; and
- responding to comments and questions from families on social media.

The guide is organized into three sections:

- How Families Use Social Media
- Social Media Planning
- Consumer Engagement—Using Social Media to Engage Families: Planning Tool

If you are responsible for developing and posting content yourself or if you work with staff who do, you can directly apply this information to your work. If others manage your social media, or if you work with a vendor to develop and post content, you can apply this information to your plans, requests, and quality improvement efforts. You can use tips and resources in this guide, along with the social media planning tool on page 21, to assess and inform how your agency uses social media.

## How Families Use Social Media

Understanding how families use social media may be useful as you create or enhance your social media plan. The ways families use specific social media sites can change based on evolving preferences and new options. Recent surveys conducted in 2015 and 2018, however, provide some insight into current usage.

The information in this section comes from three nationally representative surveys: a parent survey completed in 2015 and two completed in 2018. These surveys look at social media use by teens and adults in the United States. You can find comprehensive data tables and methodologies at <http://www.pewinternet.org>.

### Which Sites Do Parents Use and How Often?

**Seventy-four percent of parents who use social media report using Facebook daily.** More than one-third of parents who use social media report using Instagram and Twitter daily. More than half of these parents log on to these sites multiple times each day (Pew, 2015).

Data suggests that mothers are more likely than fathers to use Facebook and Pinterest. Fathers are more likely to use LinkedIn and Twitter. Thirty-five percent of parents with children under age 6 use Instagram. Twenty-two percent of parents with children age 6 and older use Instagram (Pew, 2015).

### “Parent” and “Family”

We use the words *parent* and *family* to honor all adult caregivers who make a difference in a child’s life.

*Parents* refers to biological, adoptive, and step-parents as well as primary caregivers, such as grandparents, other adult family members, and foster parents.

*Families* can be biological or nonbiological, chosen or circumstantial. Members of families are connected through cultures, languages, traditions, shared experiences, emotional commitment, and mutual support.



## What Do Parents Seek and Find on Social Media Related to Parenting?

**Many parents seek and find social support on social media.** Parents use social media to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances. They give and get general support from social media, sharing and responding to both good news and bad.

- Mothers are more likely than fathers to report offering or receiving general support through social media.
- Forty percent of parents report receiving social or emotional support for a parenting issue through their social media networks. Mothers are twice as likely as fathers to report receiving parenting support (Pew, 2015).

**Many parents also seek and find parenting information on social media.** The study referenced above asked parents about the kinds of information they sought and found in the 30 days prior to the survey.

- While most parents who use social media report finding useful general information on social media sites (79 percent), fewer (59 percent) report finding useful information about parenting.
- Only ten percent of parents with lower incomes reported “frequently” finding useful parenting information on social media.
- Further, more than one-third of parents with higher incomes said they “rarely” find useful parenting information on social media.
- Parents typically reported coming across parenting information while browsing and looking at other content. Yet thirty-one percent of parents reported asking parenting questions on social media (36 percent of mothers and 24 percent of fathers) within the month (Pew, 2015).

## How Do Specific Groups Use Social Media?

The information in this section describes social media use among U.S. teens (ages 13–17) and adults (ages 18 and older), in general. These findings, gathered in 2018, are more recent than the 2015 parent survey highlighted earlier. They include but are not limited to parents. If you are interested in providing consumer education to (or engaging with) family and community members who are not currently parents—for example, people who might be parents in the future, grandparents, extended family members, and the general public—this information may be especially useful.



## Teens

**Ninety-five percent of teens ages 13–17 have smartphones and most use social media.**

YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram are by far the most popular sites among teens. More than two-thirds of teens report using these sites. While roughly half of all teens report using Facebook, a significantly larger percentage (70 percent) of teens in households with incomes less than \$30,000 use Facebook (Pew, 2018).

Percentage of U.S. Teens Ages 13–17 Who Say They Use . . .

|                   | YouTube | Instagram | Snapchat | Facebook | Twitter | Tumblr | Reddit |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|----------|----------|---------|--------|--------|
| Boys              | 89      | 69        | 67       | 49       | 33      | 9      | 11     |
| Girls             | 81      | 75        | 72       | 53       | 32      | 9      | 4      |
| White             | 86      | 73        | 72       | 48       | 33      | 10     | 8      |
| Black             | 79      | 72        | 77       | 57       | 29      | 11     | 5      |
| Hispanic          | 85      | 72        | 64       | 58       | 36      | 7      | 7      |
| Less than \$30K   | 86      | 74        | 77       | 70       | 40      | 10     | 10     |
| \$30K to \$74,999 | 84      | 72        | 71       | 56       | 30      | 8      | 4      |
| \$75K and up      | 85      | 71        | 64       | 36       | 30      | 11     | 8      |

Source: Survey conducted in March 7–April 10, 2018. “Teens, Social Media and Technology.” Pew Research Center.

## Younger Adults

**YouTube and Facebook are used by nearly twice as many young adults (ages 18 and older) compared to other social media sites.** This is true regardless of income, educational attainment, and type of community, urban or rural. However, surveys suggest some differences in usage based on age ranges and racial or ethnic backgrounds (Pew, 2018).

**YouTube and Facebook are most popular with adults ages 18–49. However, Snapchat and Instagram are especially popular among younger adults ages 18–24.** Seventy-eight percent of adults ages 18–24 report using Snapchat, and 71 percent report using Instagram. More than half of adults ages 25–29 use these two sites. Use drops significantly, however, among adults age 30 and older (Pew, 2018).

Percentage of U.S. Adults Ages 18–49 Who Say They Use . . .

|       | Facebook | YouTube | Pinterest | Instagram | Snapchat | LinkedIn | Twitter | WhatsApp |
|-------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|
| 18–24 | 80       | 94      | 31        | 71        | 78       | 25       | 45      | 25       |
| 25–29 | 82       | 88      | 39        | 54        | 54       | 34       | 33      | 31       |
| 30–49 | 78       | 85      | 34        | 40        | 26       | 33       | 27      | 32       |

Source: Survey conducted January 3–10, 2018. “Social Media Use in 2018.” Pew Research Center.

The Millennial generation includes the average range of ages when women have their first child (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016). Data on Millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996, ages 22–37) indicate that most (85 percent) use social media, and most (82 percent) use Facebook. Around half of Millennials use Snapchat and Instagram, 47 percent and 52 percent respectively (Pew, 2018).

**Older Adults**

**Older adults also use social media, specifically Facebook.** Three quarters of Gen Xers use social media. More than half of Baby Boomers use social media. Approximately two-thirds of adults ages 50–64 (those most likely to be grandparents) report using Facebook. Less than one-quarter of adults in this age range report using other social media platforms (Pew, 2018).

| Ages   | Percentage Who Use Social Media | Percentage Who Use Facebook |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gen Xers (born 1965–1980, ages 38–53 in 2018)                | 75                              | 76                          |
| Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964, ages 54–72)                    | 57                              | 59                          |
| Silent Generation (born 1945 and earlier, ages 73 and older) | 23                              | 26                          |

Source: Survey conducted January 3–10, 2018. “Millennials stand out for their technology use, but older generations also embrace digital life.” Pew Research Center.

**Race and Ethnicity**

**As mentioned earlier, Facebook and YouTube are the most widely used sites among U.S. adults ages 18 and older, regardless of race and ethnicity.** There are some differences, however, among races and ethnicities in the use of other social media sites. Available data looks at use among White, Black and Hispanic adults ages 18 and older:

- White adults are more likely than Black and Hispanic adults to use Pinterest.
- Black adults are more likely than White and Hispanic adults to use Instagram.
- Black and Hispanic adults are more likely than White adults to use Snapchat.
- Hispanic adults are more than twice as likely as White and Black adults to use WhatsApp (Pew, 2018).

**Percentage of U.S. Adults Ages 18 and Older Who Say They Use . . .**

|          | Facebook | YouTube | Pinterest | Instagram | Snapchat | LinkedIn | Twitter | WhatsApp |
|----------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|
| White    | 67       | 71      | 32        | 32        | 24       | 26       | 24      | 14       |
| Black    | 70       | 76      | 23        | 43        | 36       | 28       | 26      | 21       |
| Hispanic | 73       | 78      | 23        | 38        | 31       | 13       | 20      | 49       |

Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3–10, 2018. “Social Media Use in 2018.” Pew Research Center.

## Adults in Rural Communities

**Most adults ages 18 and older living in rural areas are connected to the internet and go online.** However, adults living in rural areas are less likely to have access to a broadband internet connection in their homes. And when they do have access at home, the connection speed tends to be slower. They are also somewhat less likely to have a smartphone, tablet, or desktop/laptop computer (Pew, 2017). Still, nearly 60 percent of adults in rural communities report using YouTube or Facebook (Pew, 2018).

## Using Social Media Data to Begin your Planning

**As you develop your social media plan, think about the audiences you want to reach.** Start with what you know about the community you serve and the resources available to engage families on social media.

**Use data about how families use social media to help you match social media sites to your audiences.** Overall, data from the surveys discussed above indicate that having a robust presence on both Facebook and YouTube might be useful for reaching parents and grandparents. Snapchat and Instagram might be good choices for reaching younger parents and future parents. Think about how you can use Facebook and other social media sites to help draw parents to your agency's website. Consider how you might use social media to complement the education and engagement that can happen through your website.

Other examples of how you might consider using social media include:

- Including family perspectives in plans and decisions about resources and services for families' use
- Helping families build on their knowledge to make informed choices about early childhood and school-age care, education, and comprehensive services
- Demonstrating your agency's efforts to be inclusive and culturally and linguistically responsive by including information written in the languages spoken by families in the community, using pictures that reflect the diversity of families in the community, and recognizing varying child-rearing values from within the community
- Engaging families as advocates who can amplify messages by sharing information with their peers. **Tip:** In social media terms, individuals who effectively amplify messages are called *influencers*. Effective influencers understand and communicate concepts and information to their peers, not as an authority but as another parent who cares and has similar needs.

**You can use social media to influence the information that families share with one another, enhancing the social support that families give one another.** Social media is a newer version of "word of mouth" for many. Posts, comments, "likes," and "shares" serve as added resources for parents to share information with each other.



In locations where lack of access to a broadband connection is a challenge, consider using a texting system instead. Bright by Text (<https://brightbytext.org/home>) and Vroom (<https://www.vroom.org/tools-and-resources/>) are national examples of texting programs. Bloom Bright (<https://www.bloombrightin.org/>) in Indiana is a statewide example. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services partners with another agency to supply an online directory and resource center with the website 2-1-1 Maine at <https://211maine.org/> and through text messaging (Maine’s CCDF State Plan PrePrint 2019–2021).

## Social Media Planning

By understanding that most families seek information from a wide range of sources, including social media, you can support effective consumer education and consumer engagement. Use a social media plan to guide your efforts and to develop your team’s capacity to engage families using social media.

As you begin to create, review, or enhance a plan for engaging families through social media, consider the following steps:

- Identify your mission, audiences, and purposes for posting
- Establish goals, objectives, and quality assurance measures
- Develop policies and allocate resources
- Choose where and when to post
- Promote your efforts
- Create posts
- Engage with parents and others after you post

You will find tips to address each of these considerations in this section of the guide. As you review and begin to plan, you may find you need to collect and analyze data. Much of this information may be available to you (in the form of web analytics) and just needs to be gathered and organized. If you cannot find the information you need through web analytics, you may also find it necessary to do additional work to collect the data you need to complete the plan.

Consider having staff meetings and discussions with your team about these topics before and as you develop your plan. Your discussions can help align the team’s understanding about the information, skills, and assets needed to develop and implement a social media plan. Your thoughtful planning and team work upfront can help your agency use social media to inform and build relationships with families and other audiences and to achieve your desired results.

HHS.gov offers helpful resources for the “how to” strategic use of social media. These resources are designed for federal agencies and programs. However, much of the information can be applied broadly for use by States, Territories, Tribes, and other entities, including child care resource and referral agencies and other early childhood organizations. Much of the content in this guide is adapted from other resources from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), including “Social Media Considerations: Should My Office Be in There?” and “What’s In a Plan.” Learn more at <https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/index.html>

## Identify Your Mission, Audiences, and Purposes for Posting

**Consider the mission of your agency.** Determine how your agency’s social media use will contribute to your mission and work with families and children. Connecting your social media use to your mission will help to ensure alignment between the two and may help you create a social media plan with realistic and actionable goals related to your mission. As you consider your mission, this might also be a good time to reflect on how your agency can use social media to address a need rather than duplicate existing resources.

**Identify your primary audience and any secondary audiences that you hope to engage.** Consider how you currently interact with these audiences. You might find it helpful to reflect on these questions:

- Who is or might be interested in your message, program, or service?
- Why might they care about your message, program, or service?
- How do they currently get information online and offline?
- How are you currently connecting with these audiences online?
- What challenges might exist that prevent you from reaching your identified audience (HHS, 2017)?

Also consider the following questions:

- What specific interests and needs of your audience can be addressed through social media?
- What is unique about your State, Territory, Tribe, community, agency, or program that you can use to make your messages stand out from other general ones?
- What makes your messages different from other messages from similar organizations?



**Be clear about the purposes of your social media efforts.** For example, are you interested in using social media as a tool for consumer education, consumer engagement, or both?

*Consumer education* can help families build on their knowledge and understanding of early childhood and school-age care and education, child development, and related policies, procedures, and supports.

*Consumer engagement* goes beyond making information available to families. Consumer engagement relies on two-way, relationship-based interactions between families and professionals. They share information with one another and work together to build each other’s knowledge and capacities (NCPFCE, 2018).

### Potential Purposes for Posting and Relevant Reflective Questions

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Outreach and Consumer Education  | How far is your message spreading? Are you reaching diverse audiences? Are you reaching your identified audiences?  |
| Consumer Engagement  | For consumer engagement, “likes”, “shares,” and “comments” are some ways you can measure two-way interactions. How many people are participating? How often and in what way? Comment threads are key to reviewing the extent of engagement. Comments provide opportunities to have two-way conversations. Others can observe or join. You also can insert hyperlinks to move a conversation elsewhere, or initiate other kinds of contact links for continuing conversations. |
| Promoting your consumer education website (or, in web-based industry terms, “driving traffic” to your website) | Are people moving from your social media activity to your website? What do users do once they are at your website? The web analytics for your website will include counts of visitors and unique visitors as well as other information. Visitors and unique visitors combined equals your total “traffic.”  |
| Raising advocates and gaining fans   | Based on who is participating and reacting to your posts, what type of impact do they have? For example, are people and agencies with influence re-sharing your posts?  |
| Increasing voice share   | To what degree do conversations about early childhood services in your service area include your agency’s voice?<br><br>Consider the purposes and focus of your social media posts and how they can help determine the definition of your agency’s voice (Child Care Aware of America, In press).   |

*Consumer Engagement: An Orientation for Early Childhood and School-Age Care and Education Professionals* introduces a vision for engaging families as consumers of early childhood and school-age care and education services. The resource explains how consumer engagement relates to consumer education and family engagement. You can find this resource at <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/consumer-engagement-orientation-early-childhood-and-school-age-care-education-professionals>

## Establish Goals, Objectives, and Quality Assurance Measures

**Identify what you want to accomplish.** Create broad goals with ample timelines for achieving them. Create specific, shorter-term objectives as steps toward your goals. For example, if you are just starting your agency’s social media activity, you might want to begin with a goal to increase community awareness of your child care resource and referral agency and the services it provides to families and professionals. An example of a related objective might be to see that the agency’s “likes” increase weekly by a certain percentage compared to a baseline number when posting started. An example for a goal of promoting consumer engagement might be to create an objective related to the number of “shares” or “comments” for a particular family-oriented post or set of posts.

**Focus on a realistic, limited number of goals and objectives.** Consider which goals and objectives have the highest values for your agency and mission. A “SMART” approach (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) can be useful for creating short-term objectives linked to measurable outcomes.

- **Specific.** Set objectives that are as specific as possible so you know exactly what you are trying to do.
- **Measurable.** Use exact, quantitative language so that you can clearly determine if you have achieved your objectives.
- **Attainable.** Be realistic so that you strengthen your chances of success.
- **Relevant.** Relate your goals and objectives to your larger, agency-wide mission and goals so that your efforts are coordinated and coherent.
- **Timely.** Set realistic and short timeframes so you can make—and readily see—your progress (for example, “Gain 50 more Facebook users in the next two months”).



In the chart below, see examples of broad goals, SMART objectives, and social media sites that can best help you with your objectives based on each site’s characteristics.

| Broad Goal  | SMART Objective  | Chosen Social Media Sites | Site Functionality   |
|---|--|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Establish a strong and effective social media presence for your agency.  | Attain a 5 percent increase in the number of “views” and “likes” each month for 6 months. (Measured through social media sites analytics.)                                 | Instagram and Facebook    | Focuses attention on visuals, pictures, and videos, with minimal use of words other than brief comments  |
| 2. Increase the number of people who visit your agency’s website.   | Bi-weekly posts on Facebook will increase the number of visitors to your website by 20 percent each quarter. (Measured through your website’s analytics.)                  | Facebook                  | Suitable for multimedia content to tell stories and share information. This can be a highly effective method for sharing strategies, ideas, and success stories.                 |
| 3. Increase peer-to-peer sharing, strengthen relationships among professionals, and increase the visibility of your agency. | Weekly posts on LinkedIn will increase the number of new participants in the group by at least 10 percent monthly. Reassess quantitative goal after first 6 months in use. | LinkedIn                  | Provides a place to share information in writing and/or with pictures and videos or to encourage back-and-forth communications and to field queries through online conversations |

**Identify how you will determine if your efforts are successful, including how you will track your progress and make improvements.** The best way to measure your agency’s social media success is to conduct an ongoing evaluation of your progress. Success means that you have reached your intended goals and objectives, based on your plan.

You can measure the effectiveness of your social media usage with a stand-alone evaluation process or as part of a broader, agency-wide process that includes all of your agency’s activities.

Consider the following tips:

- Determine how regularly you will monitor and evaluate your social media efforts.
- Consider the mechanisms (tools) you can use to get feedback. Web analytics (your website’s analytics and those available on the social media sites you use) are good sources of information.
- Identify what metrics (standards of measurement) are available and which you will use to measure progress toward your goals and objectives. For example, you can use web analytics to measure how many people view your posts and open the links you provide (HHS, 2017). You also can track “Likes,” “Retweets,” “Shares,” views, and numbers of comments.



Web analytics is the collection, reporting, and analysis of website data. Web analytics can tell you a lot about how your site is used. This website data can show how many pages were viewed, how many people visited your site, how long they stayed on a particular page, and whether they opened any links or downloaded information. Web analytics does not give you information about how a person used the information after leaving the site. Consider ways you might also gather, for example, qualitative data through surveys, live chats, and focus groups.

## Develop Policies and Allocate Resources

**Determine roles and responsibilities to get started and keep going.** Coordinate roles so staff can cover for each other when “assigned” staff are not available or have other priorities. Some roles and responsibilities to consider include

- developing, designing, and approving content;
- creating a schedule for posts and then posting the messages;
- establishing and maintaining protocols, policies, and procedures;
- monitoring online activity, and engaging with parents after you post; and
- reviewing dashboards (progress reports), analyzing data, and planning for continuous quality improvement.

**Identify standards and policies.** Plan for how you will ensure standards are met and policies are followed, and how you will monitor compliance. Some examples of issues to include in your standards and policies are listed below. You can find more information, including sample policies, at <https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/policies/index.html>.

- **Approvals.** Include policies for developing, approving, posting, and managing content.
- **Access and Security.** Online activity presents risks regarding the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information. Be sure to consider threats and ways to mitigate potential risks before posting.
- **Copyrighted Content.** Make sure you have permission to use trademarked pictures and images or logos.
- **Branding.** Include standards and policies for branding that clearly identify your agency’s ownership or sponsorship and brand.
- **Accessibility.** Ensure that content posted or produced through the use of online technology is accessible to people with disabilities by following, for example, the requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- **Records Management.** Include policies that address when or if a post or comment can be deleted. Also address how to respond to a request for a record of your social media activity.

- **Comment Moderation.** Create or link to an existing “comment policy.” Determine processes to monitor and respond to comments. (Refer to the “Engaging with Families After You Post” section of this guide for tips.)
- **Linking, Liking, Following, and Endorsing.** Include an exit disclaimer when providing hyperlinks that take the user outside of your website. (Go to <https://www.hrsa.gov/hrsa-exit-disclaimer.html> for an example of an exit disclaimer.) Create criteria for what entities are appropriate to follow or “like” from your account (HHS, 2017).

### More About Content Approval

In employee orientation manuals, be sure to address protocols for communicating and approving content so all employees are aware of, understand, and can follow your agency’s social media policies and procedures. Be sure to address when staff should seek assistance in managing communications—for example, if online communication becomes inappropriate or negative, or when it presents an imminent threat.

Agency policies may also include guidelines for employees’ use of their personal social media accounts. An advisory from the U.S. Office of Government Ethics offers guidance for federal employees’ use of social media. You can find it at <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/oip/legacy/2014/07/23/dag-memo-personal-use-social-media.pdf>.

It is important for staff to be well versed in these protocols so workflow can be smooth and inquiries and challenges can be handled efficiently and effectively. A comprehensive approach to handling online communications will enhance your agency’s ability to achieve its goals to serve parents well.

It is important to be aware of your agency’s or funded project’s communications policies and protocols before you reach out to the public.

Procedures will likely need to change over time to adapt to new situations that arise and that may not be covered in your current set of protocols. Review procedures regularly and update as necessary. Be sure that all staff are made aware of any updates.

**Identify any new technical resources that you will need to set up to manage your plan.** Assess whether or not your agency has all of the technical resources needed to implement your social media plan. Some examples of technical resources may include access to a large volume of graphics and pictures, or owning software programs that enhance the information shared and catch the eyes of the user (with dynamic visuals, including videos), and securing the services of a vendor to assist you with your data analytics process. Arrange to acquire what you need, or adjust your plan so that your agency can reach the determined goals with existing resources.

## Choose Where and When to Post

**Choose the right social media sites for your audiences and purposes.** In the first steps, you identified your audiences. In this step, consider which social media sites your identified audiences use; when and how often they use them. (Refer to the “How Families Use Social Media” section above for some insight into these answers.)

**Learn about which sites to use for which purposes, and incorporate this information into your social media plan.** This consideration is key to effectively engaging parents through social media. The chart below provides examples of types of social media sites and specific purposes of each. Some sites are used in a variety of ways to serve multiple purposes.

| Site Type                               | Purpose  | Examples (not all that apply)   |
|---|--|---|
| Networking                              | Provide a place to share information in writing or with pictures and videos, encourage back-and-forth communications, and field queries from parents through online conversations. | Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook  |
| Streaming                               | Focus attention on visuals, pictures, and videos with minimal use of words.  | YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Instagram, Facebook   |
| Blogging                                | Integrate multimedia content to tell stories and share information. This can be a highly effective method for sharing strategies, ideas, and success stories.                      | Twitter, Reddit, mobile apps, company forums, company blogs                                     |
| Customer service/ education/ engagement | Focus on concise messaging. Messages are used to drive users to other sites/places for more information or next steps. Often used for “live” messages and events coverage.         | Facebook, Twitter, online reviews, opportunities within your website (chat spaces, for example) |

Source: Family Voices, Quality Choices. Child Care Aware® of America.



Each site has its own mechanism for posting. You can find basic information about how to post on each site’s “help” or “FAQ” webpage. For maximum effectiveness, schedule your posts during times when parents are most likely to view and respond. The chart below suggests peak times for posting on each site.

|                            | Facebook    | Twitter         | Instagram             | Pinterest               | You Tube  |
|----------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Optimal Day to Post</b> | Friday      | Monday–Thursday | Monday                | Saturday                | Any day   |
| <b>Time to Post</b>        | 1 pm–4 pm   | 1 pm–3 pm       | Evenings and weekends | 2 pm–4 pm<br>8 pm–11 pm | Any time  |
| <b>How Often</b>           | 1–2 per day | 5 per day       | 5–10 per week         | 5–10 per week           | Post consistently so that people are drawn to your channel. |

Source: Family Voices, Quality Choices. Child Care Aware® of America.

In addition, if they are set up as a business page, social media sites often have dashboards in which you can find data on your own activities. Dashboards are progress reports provided by individual social media sites that provide data about your use of a site. They are part of your web analytics. Review your agency’s dashboards for clues to identify and schedule optimal times for your audiences to see and respond to your posts.

## Promote Your Efforts

**Plan how to promote your social media efforts.** Consider ways that you already interact with or otherwise have people’s attention. For example, encourage newsletter recipients or parents you might work with in person to find you on Facebook.

You may need to use a set of different strategies to meet each of your plan’s goals. This approach will help you to reach a broader group of users. Never rely on one strategy to do all the work and to meet your goal. Diverse strategies increase your chances for successful outcomes.

Cross-promote over other available channels. *Cross-promote* means to bring attention to resources related to or similar to a resource that has gained attention already. In other words, once you have attention on a resource, share information about additional related resources. Your original audience may benefit from being exposed to additional resources, and cross-promoting provides you with an opportunity to draw attention to other topics that you wish to promote.

**Explore opportunities to partner with others.** Partnering with other agencies and campaigns can increase your agency’s reach to audiences that otherwise might not be aware of your agency. Consider what agencies and programs might be involved in efforts similar to yours. Think about ways you can work together to advance one another’s efforts. For example, work out cooperative

agreements with partner organizations to refer parents to your partners' website and social media pages; and your partners can refer parents to yours. Determining in advance what kinds of materials and resources will be cross-shared is very important. Provide guidance to staff (and contractors, if applicable) regarding trusted partners and resources, and what to do if they have a question about a source.

As an agency, consider joining larger social media campaigns by using a specific hashtag. A hashtag is a label that highlights keywords within a post. A hashtag starts with the pound symbol (#) and is followed by a keyword with no space in between, for example, #childcare. Social media users use hashtags to search for information about a specific topic and also to express affiliation with a topic. When you include a hashtag in a post, your post will show up in lists of other posts that use the same hashtag.

Make sure that any sharing that occurs is aligned with your agency's mission and goals, as well as with the goals of your communication and social media plan.

## Create Posts

Social media is one tool you can use for consumer education. You can use social media to encourage two-way communications and information exchanges with parents. These two-way interactions are referred to as consumer engagement.

Consumer engagement describes how parents and professionals can work together to promote informed decision-making and drive quality improvement and equitable access to high-quality programs. As families expand their knowledge and leadership capacities they can become more effective in finding and applying research-based information—to inform their choices about a program for their child, for example, monitor their child's experiences in a program, or use their voices to advocate for higher-quality and equitable access to services.

As professionals expand their knowledge and capacities, they can become more effective in inviting and responding to families' interests and values, and in supporting and partnering with families and other stakeholders.

When families are engaged as consumers, they act as:

*Consumer education* equips parents with information to help them build on their knowledge and understanding of child development, and programs and services. Consumer education tends to focus on one-way communication of information to parents.

*Consumer engagement* refers to two-way, mutually respectful interactions in which families and professionals work together to find, share, and use information in support of families' well-being and children's health, development, and learning.



- **Decision-makers** who are equipped with information and who seek access to quality early childhood and school-age care and education for their children
- **Resourceful users** of information and early childhood, school-age, and comprehensive services that support child and family well-being throughout early childhood and beyond
- **Trusted peers** who help their friends and families understand and connect with the highest quality options available
- **Leaders** who advance program quality through leadership efforts in their child's program and their community (NCPFCE, 2018)

### Create posts that are easy to understand and that encourage engagement.

**Use plain language.** Write as you would speak. Be clear and concise. Keep sentences short and direct. Use short, simple, familiar words. Consult the *Federal Plain Language Guidelines* for more information. See a link to these guidelines in the Resources section of this guide.

**Consider literacy and reading level.** An eighth-grade reading level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for sixth-grade level when developing content for parents (ECLKC, 2017). The Flesch-Kincaid readability test can be useful in measuring the grade-level of your content. You may find this readability test in your word processing software. You can use plain language strategies to help lower the reading level. For example, try shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables.

**Convey a strengths-based approach.** You can encourage positive relationships with families by conveying strengths-based attitudes in your social media content. Examples of strengths-based attitudes to convey to parents in all your interactions, web-based or in person, include:

- All families have strengths. Each family has unique strengths that can be the foundation of our discussions and partnership. Always start with strengths, even when there are challenges.
- Families are the first and most important teachers of their children. Children's healthy development relies on sensitive and nurturing interactions within the family and the community.
- Families are our partners with a critical role in their child's development. Families make choices every day that affect a child's development and learning. These choices are rooted in their belief systems and cultural identities.
- Families have expertise about their child and their family. Families understand their children best and make important decisions every day for their children's well-being. When families share what they know, children, families, and providers benefit.
- Families' contributions are important and valuable. Being open to a family's suggestions and requests helps us do our best on behalf of their child. We can encourage effective partnerships when we invite their expertise and listen to their priorities (NCPFCE, 2018).

**Develop action-oriented messages that reflect strengths-based attitudes.** Key messages are shorter statements intended to communicate information and follow-up actions clearly to parents. Consider using these statements or your own similar statements in your social media posts:

- You are your child’s first and most important teacher. As you search for child care, consider which program best matches your family’s and child’s approach to learning.
- You have a critical role in your family’s development. Talk with your child care provider about your family’s needs and goals.
- You are the expert on your child and family. Look for a child care provider who asks for and respects your input.
- As your child’s first teacher and decision-maker, your input is important and valuable. Work with your child care provider to find ways to work together to support your child’s learning in child care and at home.

**Use people-first language.** People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation they may be experiencing. When you use people-first language, you avoid defining a person by his or her circumstance. You acknowledge the circumstance as simply an attribute. For example:

- Refer to “resources for families experiencing homelessness” instead of “resources for homeless families.”
- Say “CCDF is a federal program that assists families with low incomes to access child care options so that they can work or attend school . . . ” instead of explaining that “CCDF is a federal program that assists low-income families in obtaining child care so that they can work or attend school.”
- Refer to “programs for children with special needs” rather than referencing “programs for special-needs children.”

**Be culturally and linguistically responsive.** Your social media posts can be the first places where you help families feel welcome. A culturally and linguistically responsive social media post appeals to and communicates effectively with diverse users. It recognizes, affirms, and showcases families’ diverse cultures, knowledge, and experiences. It helps to eliminate and prevent disparities related to accessing information about early care and education and comprehensive family services.

Some tips for developing posts that are culturally and linguistically responsive include:

- Choose visual images that will encourage all families to feel included. Consider getting permission to use pictures of the diverse children and families served by your agency, and use these in your posts.
- Describe your agency’s efforts to be inclusive and serve diverse families.
- Consider highlighting the cultures and languages (English and other languages) represented by your staff.

- Consider race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and family composition when making decisions about visual, audio, and written content.
- Include representatives of diverse populations from your community to field-test or co-construct potential posts.
- Perform a rigorous quality review process for all written translations, as you would for English versions. Consider such aspects as spelling, grammar, punctuation, plain language, clarity, and cultural context.
- Perform the same rigorous quality review for audio interpretations (relevant for videos posted on social media). Consider such aspects as tone, language use, pace of speech (not too fast or slow), facial affect, and cultural considerations for all elements of the audio track.

Each family in the community you serve has a unique set of beliefs, values, and priorities to be respected and taken into account when developing social media content.

Key issues—including education, family roles, caregiving practices, and even what determines acceptable child behavior and school readiness—are all strongly influenced by a family’s culture. The cultural beliefs of families directly inform decisions they make about their children.

## Engage with Parents and Others After You Post

Engaging with parents on social media means to communicate back and forth, adding information as the online conversation proceeds. Some tips for engaging parents after you post include:

- Respond to a comment or a question made to your post by making a comment response on the same site. For example, if a post is made on Facebook and feedback was received on Facebook, the response should be on Facebook.
- To help build relationships, respond to feedback in a personalized manner whenever possible—in a way that treats the user as a person. For example, Jane Smith asks in Comments, “How do I find out if my provider participates in my State’s Quality Rating System?” A potential reply might be, “Great question, Jane Smith! You can find a list of participating providers on our website: [www...](#)”
- Sometimes it is best to delay your response briefly and give other parents a chance to make additional comments, or to begin a longer engagement and discussion with several parents about a shared topic of interest. You want others to participate in and even lead the online conversation. You also want to avoid taking over or monopolizing the conversation yourself by posting multiple comments in succession in response to others without pausing for comments, queries, or input from those you are addressing.

- Redirect users to your website where you have a more extensive venue, such as a live chat space. This allows you to engage in more individualized, back-and-forth messaging. This redirection can also help with venues that limit the length of messages for users. You can also refer the user to more extensive resource information available on your website.
- Sometimes an appropriate response is simply to thank parents for their feedback, or comment that the question they asked is a good one.
- Be aware that some questions might be baiting questions, meant to start an online challenge. In this case, be simple, kind, and clear with your responses and know when to end the exchange by making a polite final comment. A good strategy in this kind of situation is to send a link that will refer a parent to some additional resources.
- Never engage in online conversations that disclose personal identifying information. Redirect anyone sharing sensitive or confidential information online to other venues, such as email, hot lines, or agency phone numbers.

Consider using a “comment policy” or guidelines to encourage respectful dialogue. Here are some examples:

- You can help others using the site by focusing your comments on the discussion topic at hand.
- All viewpoints are welcome. Please be respectful of others. Avoid personal attacks, profanity, and arguments.
- You can help ensure that information on this site is accurate by making certain that your comments and any information you share is truthful and offered in good faith.
- You can help keep this site clutter-free by avoiding repeated postings of identical or very similar content, and by refraining from aggressively promoting services or products.

Adapted from HHS’s Comment Policy, at <https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/policies/comment-policy/index.html>

Learn more about consumer engagement and strategies for engaging families by visiting the Child Care Technical Assistance Network (CCTA) web page (<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/>). For more about family and consumer engagement and resources produced by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family>, email [pfce@ectta.info](mailto:pfce@ectta.info), or call (toll-free) 1-855-208-0909.

# Consumer Engagement—Using Social Media to Engage Families: Planning Tool

Use this Planning Tool to support your efforts to create a plan for using social media. This tool is meant to enhance your use of the *Consumer Engagement: Using Social Media to Engage Families* guide. We encourage you to consider the tips and resources in the guide and this planning tool together.

| <b>Considerations to address in the planning process:</b>   | <b>Status:</b><br>“Yes,”<br>“No,” or “In Progress” | <b>Next Steps:</b><br>What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future? | <b>Comments:</b><br>Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider. |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>IDENTIFY YOUR MISSION, AUDIENCE, AND PURPOSES FOR POSTING</b>  |  |   |   |
| Consider the mission of your agency. Document how your social media plan and use will contribute to your mission.                       |  |   |   |
| Identify your primary audience and any secondary audiences you hope to engage.  |  |   |   |
| Define the purpose of your social media efforts, e.g., outreach, parent involvement, family or community engagement.                    |  |   |   |
| <b>ESTABLISH GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND QUALITY ASSURANCE MEASURES</b>  |  |   |   |
| Identify what you want to accomplish. Create broad goals with ample timelines for achievement.  |  |   |   |
| Create specific, shorter-term objectives as steps toward your goals.  |  |   |   |
| Link short-term objectives to measurable outcomes by using a “SMART” (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) approach. |  |   |   |
| Determine how often you will monitor and evaluate your progress toward your goals and objectives.                                       |  |   |   |
| Identify the mechanisms (tools) and metrics (measures) you will use to gather feedback.   |  |   |   |
| Create a plan for responding to (making changes) based on feedback.   |  |   |   |



| Considerations to address in the planning process:  | Status:<br>“Yes,”<br>“No,” or “In Progress” | Next Steps:<br>What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future? | Comments:<br>Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider. |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>DEVELOP POLICIES AND ALLOCATE RESOURCES</b>  |   |  |  |
| Determine roles and responsibilities to get started and keep going. Coordinate some overlap of roles so staff can cover for each other when “assigned” staff are not available or obligated elsewhere.  |   |  |  |
| Identify standards and policies. Plan for how you will monitor compliance. (See page 12 in the guide for a list of potential policy topics.)  |   |  |  |
| In employee orientation materials, include protocols for communicating and approving content so that all employees are aware of, understand, and can abide by your agency’s social media policies and procedures.   |   |  |  |
| Regularly schedule and conduct reviews of protocols. Be clear on steps for communicating to staff any changes in these protocols.   |   |  |  |
| Assess whether your agency has the technical resources needed to implement your social media plan (e.g., software or access to a collection of images/photos). If not, arrange to acquire what you need. If that is not possible, then adjust your plan so that your agency can reach the determined goals with existing resources. |   |  |  |
| <b>CHOOSE WHERE AND WHEN TO POST</b>  |   |  |  |
| Find and consider data about which social media sites your identified audiences tend to use, when, and how often. (The data on pages 4–6 in this guide may be helpful.)   |   |  |  |
| Consider the purposes of different social media sites and how they align with the purposes of your plan, goals, and objectives.   |   |  |  |
| Review data and dashboards to better understand peak times for posting on certain sites. Plan and schedule optimal times for your audiences to see and respond to your posts.   |   |  |  |

| <b>Considerations to address in the planning process:</b>   | <b>Status:</b><br>“Yes,”<br>“No,” or “In Progress” | <b>Next Steps:</b><br>What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future? | <b>Comments:</b><br>Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider. |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>PROMOTE YOUR EFFORTS</b>   |  |   |   |
| Consider ways that you already interact with or otherwise have people’s attention (e.g., through a newsletter or in-person interactions) and how you can cross-promote your social media pages through these activities.  |  |   |   |
| Identify potential partner agencies. Engage in cooperative agreements to refer families to the websites and social media pages of partners.   |  |   |   |
| Consider joining larger social media campaigns and using hashtags to connect your posts to others’ posts on related topics. Be sure that these types of efforts are included or aligned with your agency’s overall mission and goals as well as with your communication and social media plans. |  |   |   |
| <b>CREATE POSTS</b>   |  |   |   |
| Create posts that are easy to understand and that encourage engagement.   |  |   |   |
| Use plain language. Write as you would speak. Be clear and concise. Keep sentences short and direct. Use short, simple, familiar words.   |  |   |   |
| Consider literacy and reading level. An eighth-grade reading level is widely accepted for information meant for the general public. For easier reading, aim for a sixth-grade level when developing content for parents.  |  |   |   |
| Convey a strengths-based approach. You can encourage positive relationships with families by conveying strengths-based attitudes in your social media content.  |  |   |   |
| Develop action-oriented messages that are grounded in strengths-based attitudes.  |  |   |   |

| Considerations to address in the planning process:  | Status:<br>“Yes,”<br>“No,” or “In Progress” | Next Steps:<br>What do you need to enhance or accomplish in the near future? | Comments:<br>Highlight progress made, supportive documentation, or any other important information you want to consider. |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>CREATE POSTS, cont.</b>  |   |  |  |
| Use people-first language. People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation he or she may be experiencing.  |   |  |  |
| Ensure that posts are culturally and linguistically responsive. Posts recognize, affirm, and showcase families’ diverse cultures, knowledge, and experiences.   |   |  |  |
| <b>ENGAGE WITH PARENTS AND OTHERS AFTER YOU POST</b>  |   |  |  |
| Before you post, plan for how you will engage with parents (and others) after you post. Include this aspect of social media use in your policies, and ensure that staff are well-trained in these policies. |   |  |  |
| Develop and/or adopt and post a “comment policy” or guidelines to encourage respectful dialogue on your social media pages.   |   |  |  |

## Resources

**Building Partnerships Series—Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/strategies-family-engagement-attitudes-and-practices>

**Foundations for Quality Series—Consumer Education Websites: Guide to Creating a Family-Friendly Experience**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/consumer-education-websites-guide-creating-family-friendlyexperience-and-assessment-tool>

**Foundations for Quality Series—Consumer Engagement: Orientation for Early Childhood and School-age Care and Education Professionals**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/consumer-engagement-orientation-early-childhood-and-schoolage-care-education-professionals>

**Foundations for Quality Series—Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families**  
<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/topics/family-engagement-and-consumer-education>

**U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) Social Media (resource page)**  
<https://www.hhs.gov/web/social-media/index.html>

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