

Responding to COVID-19: Seven Practices to Guide Funding and Programming

STEM Next Opportunity Fund reimagines family engagement in the changing environment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Family engagement is crucial now more than ever. As we accommodate the disruptions created by COVID-19, we must plan for the future—a future that does a far better job of distributing opportunities. As youth return to schools and afterschool programs, we need to address the long-term impacts of this pandemic. We must change the status quo—now. We must first and foremost work the hardest for those families most impacted and most vulnerable.

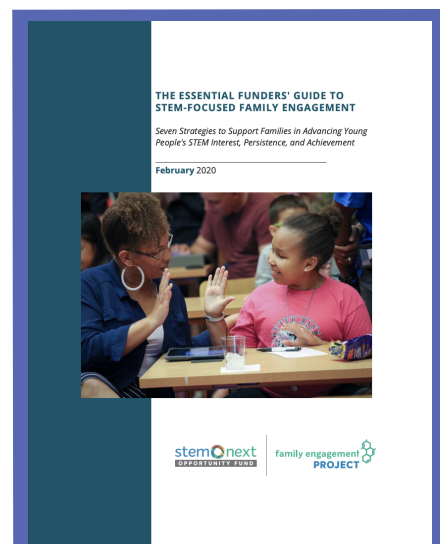
These are challenging times as we deal with the COVID-19 health crisis and disruptions in every aspect of our lives. With the closure of schools, libraries, community centers, child care facilities, and out-of-school-time programs, families are left to care for their children's physical, emotional, and educational needs in unprecedented ways. Families are being asked to step up to support their children's learning when they don't know how they will put food on the table, pay the rent, or return to work. This is hard for every family; it's particularly hard for families that were struggling to meet their basic needs before COVID-19 hit. Cross-sector collaboration is more important than ever in coordinating support for families.

In response to COVID-19, there are a lot of great educational resources being shared and repurposed for families at home. It's a daunting challenge for families to navigate through online offerings, daily activities, and parenting advice. Resources and services are not evenly accessible across communities. Impacts are not evenly distributed. Visit our [blog post with five practices to address this challenge and support families](#), especially those most vulnerable and impacted.

The STEM Next Opportunity Fund is committed to tackling the opportunity gap in STEM by advocating for efforts that ensure equity and access. We have championed quality programming for all youth both as a funder and advocate for out-of-school-time programs and professional development for national youth-serving organizations. STEM Next's Family Engagement Project elevates the critical role of families in supporting youth to pursue and persist in STEM—particularly for girls and youth from populations underrepresented in STEM. In [Changing the Game in STEM with Family Engagement: A White Paper for Practitioners and Field Leaders to Empower Families in STEM](#), we highlight promising practices that support youth's interest, persistence, and achievement in STEM.

With [The Essential Funders' Guide to STEM-Focused Family Engagement: Seven Strategies to Support Families in Advancing Young People's Interest, Persistence, and Achievement](#), we elevate to corporate and private foundation funders the imperative of capacity building for family engagement. These essential elements—capacity building of relationships, resources, and professional development—require sustained support.

During this unprecedented time in education, when the role of families has been elevated to “critical partner,” educators from in-school and out-of-school-time programs have the unique opportunity to reflect and adjust their strategies. Here are seven practices to support families in this next generation of family engagement. Guiding questions are written to help funders as they prioritize their investment. The questions can also be used as a self-assessment tool for those providing STEM services to families.



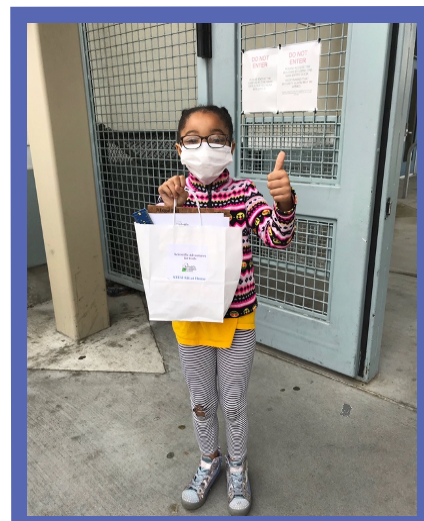
The Essential Funders' Guide to STEM-Focused Family Engagement

1. Listening and learning from families

- Do activities respond to what parents have said they need?
- Are relationships built with parents that will be sustained over time?

In practice: [Scientific Adventures for Girls](#) reaches out to every family with phone calls, texts, and emails that share weekly activities and questions to guide conversations within families. While afterschool programs were shut down, staff members called families to check in and provide STEM kits for the home that could be picked up with lunches and homework. In this new school year, Scientific Adventures for Girls is delivering virtual STEM programming for girls, building on lessons learned from the summer.

Photo Credit: Scientific Adventures for Girls



2. Building families' capacity to encourage and support

- Do activities help families overcome their fears and anxieties and tap into their existing knowledge and skills about STEM?
- Do parents understand how to integrate STEM into their everyday routines with activities with accessible materials for use at home?

In practice: [Ready4K](#) crafts text message with short, simple tips that map onto daily routines and describe how these practices build skills and set the stage for learning. This approach is highly successful in empowering parents and is especially important in being responsive to current levels of stress felt by parents. Resources are available in English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Arabic.



Photo Credit: Ready4K

3. Understanding the context: race/ethnicity, gender, ability

- Are parents engaged in ways that are culturally responsive?
- Do program materials include photos of youth with disabilities and language that explicitly welcome all youth and signal that their parents will be supported in the program?



Photo Credit: Youth Code Jam

In practice: [Youth Code Jam](#) shows parents that their children can have a future in technology. During workshops, parents see how their children who are [neurodiverse](#) can be successful at coding and acquiring leadership skills for personally and professionally rewarding careers. Youth Code Jam helps parents see a career pathway and the next steps to get there. Coding activities are available in English and Spanish. Youth Code Jam has expanded its reach with virtual programs and training for educators.

4. Sharing information about STEM pathways

- Is information provided to families and young people on the STEM resources available in their communities?
- Are connections to STEM role models offered?

In practice: [New York Hall of Science](#) helps families learn about academic coursework and pathways to STEM-related careers, such as internship opportunities and paid summer programs. Especially for first-generation families with both high needs and high aspirations, connecting museum activities to STEM careers helps make pathways to STEM opportunities more explicit. NYSCI developed a [COVID-19 exhibit](#) that is available online in English and Spanish. While the Museum is closed, NYSCI is offering [at-home STEM games, experiments, and activities](#).

5. Supporting STEM academic achievement

- Do parents know how to productively engage with their children's teachers to monitor and support their children's in-school STEM learning?
- Do young people and families understand the academic pathways necessary to prepare them for entrance into postsecondary STEM programs and what families need to do to ensure that their children have completed the prerequisites to take their desired next step?

In practice: [EdNavigator](#) responded to the needs of families and flipped its model for parent engagement. Instead of requiring parents to come to the organization, EdNavigator goes to parents where they work and offers guidance on supporting students' learning. Resources on its website are available in English and Spanish. In spring and summer, EdNavigator did a beautiful job with its [One Great Thing for Tomorrow](#). These daily messages offered a few great ideas—like one question for dinnertime, one simple activity to do together, and one e-learning resource. It currently offers [The Kinda Guide](#), a weekly guide for parenting in a pandemic.

6. Empowering parents and guardians

- Are parents introduced to one another and to a supportive peer community?
- Are parents connected to organizations and resources advocating for improved access to rigorous STEM curriculum and STEM programs?

In practice: [Digital Youth Divas](#) lifts up expressions of encouragement that build confidence and sustain interest. This helps parents recognize the many ways in which they are already supporting their children. These include inviting their children to show them what they are learning; sharing a skill like cooking, sewing, or working with tools; and asking questions and searching for answers together—especially in response to their children's interests. Digital Youth Divas responded to COVID-19 with a variety of offerings to families that include email updates, Zoom socials and showcase events, iPad loaner program, and parent portal to view and comment on youth work.

7. Promoting organizational development

- Do the recruitment, professional development, and staff evaluation practices emphasize skills necessary for effective family engagement?

In practice: Imagine Science of Orange County, in California, supported a yearlong community of practice across Boys and Girls Clubs of Garden Grove and Huntington Valley; Girls Inc. of Orange County; and YMCA of Anaheim. Building upon research and practice resources, these teams shared lessons learned and discussed new ways to support their staff in deepening family engagement. While in-person programs were on hold, they called families, gathered input, and made plans to deepen these practices in their engagement with families. They are using the seven strategies and guiding questions to help set goals for family engagement this school year.

As the need for quality family engagement in STEM is heightened and prioritized across the field, continuous improvement efforts aimed at family engagement must be built on a unifying framework based in evidence and practice. STEM Next has engaged [The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience \(PEAR\) at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School](#), to develop a planning tool based on a theoretical framework to inform best practices and to guide further research and practice. We believe this tool will have many applications for STEM programs and funders. COVID-19 has heightened the shortcomings of educational opportunities across our communities. This is our moment to come together, reimagine the possibilities, and advance research, programming, and policy for the next generation of family engagement. This will take all of us engaged in collective work to ensure that every family has access to the opportunities to support their children at home and to broker opportunities in their communities. ↻

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Suggested Citation:

Kekelis, L. (2020). *Responding to COVID-19: Seven Practices to Guide Funding and Programming*. Global Family Research Project. Retrieved from bit.ly/SevenPracticesSTEM