

Family Engagement Game Brings Theory Into Practice

The Family Engagement Game demonstrates a need for interactive and participatory strategies for practitioners engaging families across the ecology of learning.

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There is growing interest in games as an exciting and engaging tool for professional development. At GFRP, we believe gamification holds promise for in-person and on-line professional development designed to build the capacity of teachers and all those who work to engage families in their multiple roles supporting their children's learning and development. Our view is based on our experience, shared here to encourage others to develop and to try games too. If you are already developing or using games in your professional development work, let us know, we want to share other promising examples and experiences with games.

Imagine: You're a children's librarian who used to have a core group of parents and children that were regulars at your storytimes, art workshops and other events. But now many of those children are in 5th or 6th grade and you rarely see them. Or they come in with their friends to use the library's computers or other technology.

When you talk to moms, you hear a lot about STEM at school, but you're not sure exactly what students are doing in the classroom or how the library might provide additional ways for families to participate in science, math and other activities that support learning.

- Do you reimagine your services for tweens by partnering with teachers to offer joint STEM events for families?
- Do you raise up the voices of tweens and their parents by inviting them to create new programs or events that would interest them?
- Or do you reinforce the important role of families by asking parents and grandparents who work in STEM fields to lead hands-on workshops for students?

Those are among the possible options that players in [GFRP's Family Engagement Game for Change](#) might pitch as they compete to solve dilemmas that are likely familiar to professionals working in the family engagement field—whether that's in a library, a school, an early-childhood program or another community organization.

Why a Game?

When it comes to family engagement, challenges regarding parent involvement in schools, or engaging bilingual families at the library, for example, can feel separate from more theoretical discussions practitioners read about during their own professional training. This is especially true for dilemmas that happen in-the-moment, or that require collaboration from different people and organizations. This leaves us with the question:

“ How might we bridge theory and practice together when confronting tricky problems in family engagement?”

The Family Engagement Game is an effort to do just that. Games, whether online or in-person, can invite meaningful discussion and create a rich learning experience that evokes participation and problem-solving from all learners. The purpose of [gaming](#) is to allow practitioners opportunities to collaborate, reflect, try out new ideas, and take risks in a space that is both fun and safe. When designed within the lens of professional development, games provide an opportunity for co-creating learning experiences that capitalize on practitioners' diverse expertise. In an effort to experiment with gaming as a means for family engagement strategizing and knowledge-building, we sought to develop a fun and interactive way for practitioners—and potentially, families—to come together and solve problems, with the added bonus of some healthy competition!

Context and Collaboration Matter

When designing professional development opportunities that place family engagement at the center, we have found that providing strategies that can be molded or changed to fit their given context is essential. We have extended this thinking to also include active engagement of families as partners within the work itself.

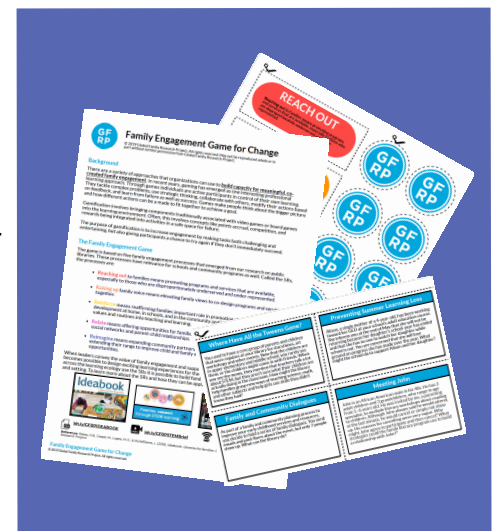
The challenge, however, is that practitioners tend to face different problems, and while employing one-off or one-time family engagement strategies might work in the short term, long term success requires a collaborative approach at multiple spaces and levels across the ecology of learning. In a [report](#) commissioned by the Carnegie foundation, GFRP specifically presented ten “Principles of Research and Practice for Building Family and Community Engagement,” which couched family engagement within the context of comprehensive initiatives and stressed the importance of bringing multiple stakeholders together for the sake of efficacy and impact. In other words, creating avenues that combine critical thinking, strategy, and collaborative reflection within solutions-focused discussion is essential for meaningful family engagement.

Gaming Brings Theory Into Practice

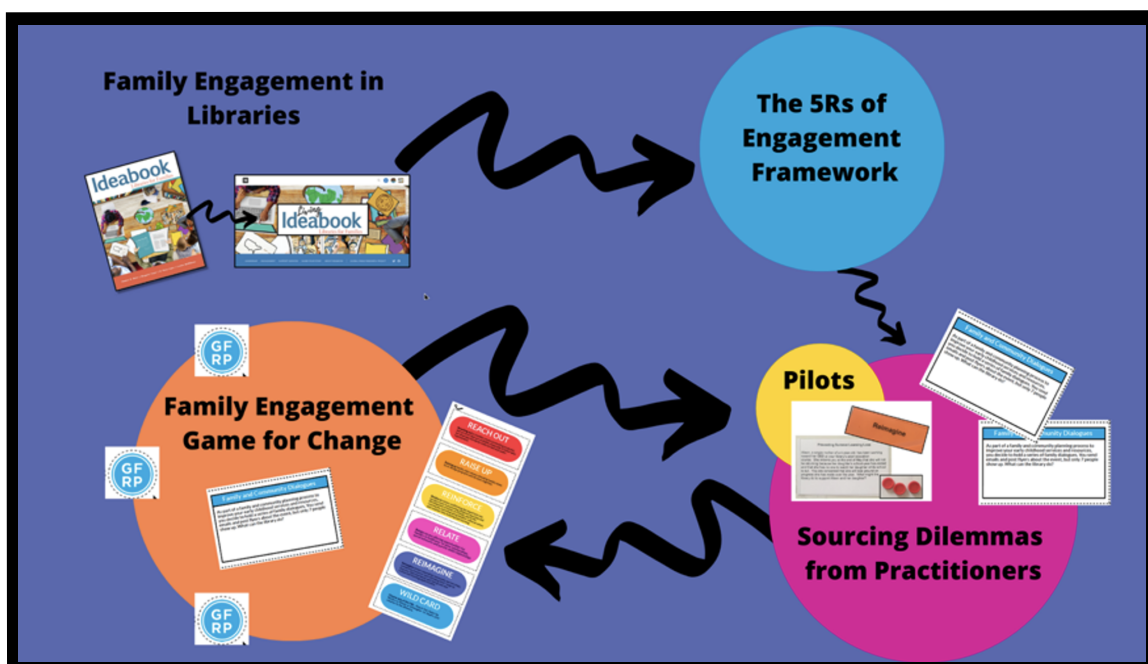
Program administrators and those who plan professional development have to make choices when searching for learning experiences that are likely to have greatest impact on those who work with children and families. For this reason, our recent work at Global Family Research Project has focused on developing research-informed tools and experiences that support innovation and co-creation in family engagement and create a process that begins with shifting mindsets, building empathy, understanding multiple perspectives, then collaborating and reflecting toward a plan to try something new. Like design thinking and the case method approaches to family engagement, gaming is a mostly one-off experience that is limited by the players who are brought to the table. But a game’s memorable nature and the practice of pitching ideas in a collaborative, but competitive setting is key for setting it apart.

In particular, the Family Engagement Game promotes a fun, stress-free environment for utilizing a theoretical framework to create a conversation that is informed by taking a problem and looking at it from multiple vantage points. In many ways, using a game as an approach for professional development allows players to expand their family engagement imagination, especially if there are diverse stakeholders playing together.

Inspired by the “judge” mechanic from “Apples to Apples,” the Family Engagement Game for Change allows different stakeholders to apply their knowledge and critical thinking within the context of family engagement. Presented with a real-life dilemmas, the players bring expertise from their own areas of practice to propose a solution aligned with a randomly chosen 5R strategy card. The “judge” selects the most feasible, desirable, and viable solution. The winner for each round is awarded with a GFRP token, and the player with the most tokens at the end of the game wins.



Family Engagement Game



Family Engagement Game Design Process

How the Game Works

Each round of gameplay starts with selecting a “judge” for the round, who deals each of the players in the group one of the colorful, 5R cards: Raise Up, Reach Out, Reimagine, Relate, Reinforce, and a Wild Card, just for fun! This card represents the perspective and type of solution that the player will be tasked with pitching to the group. The [5Rs framework](#) gives players a starting point for their thinking, as well as guidance to fall back on if they are unsure about the type of solution they might want to craft.

<p>REACH OUT</p> <p><small>Reaching out to families means promoting programs and services that are available, especially to those who are disproportionately underserved and under-represented.</small></p>	<p>REINFORCE</p> <p><small>Reinforce means reaffirming the important role families have in promoting children's learning and development at home, in schools, and in the community and integrating families' cultural values and routines into teaching and learning</small></p>	<p>REIMAGINE</p> <p><small>Reimagine means expanding community partnerships, combining resources and extending their range to improve child and family well-being and new connected learning opportunities</small></p>
<p>RAISE UP</p> <p><small>Raising up family voice means elevating family views to co-design programs and services together.</small></p>	<p>RELATE</p> <p><small>Relate means offering opportunities for families to build peer-to-peer relationships, social networks and parent-child relationships</small></p>	<p>WILD CARD</p> <p><small>Choose any of the 5 Rs --Reach Out, Raise Up, Reinforce, Relate or Reimagine--to inspire your solution to the dilemma.</small></p>

5R Cards and Wildcard

Next, a dilemma—one that is provided, or one that the group has created themselves—is read aloud by the judge, challenging players to think about serving families in a new way. The ability for players to create and respond to their own dilemma additionally fuels creativity and meaningful brainstorming of solutions to tricky family engagement challenges they might face in their own lives.

<p style="background-color: #00bcd4; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">Preventing Summer Learning Loss</p> <p>Alison, a single mother of a 4-year-old, has been working toward her GED at your school's adult education course. She informs you at the end of May that she will not be returning because her daughter's school-year has ended and that she has no one to watch her daughter while school is out. You are concerned that she will lose ground on progress she has made over the year. What might the school do to support Alison and her daughter?</p>	<p style="background-color: #00bcd4; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">Spanish-Language Storytime</p> <p>You see an increase in more Spanish-speaking families with young children at your library. Their children look at the books and some of them speak English. But they and their parents don't participate in the weekly storytimes offered at the library. You don't have any librarians who are fluent enough in Spanish to offer a separate storytime. Where might the library turn to create such a program?</p>	<p style="background-color: #00bcd4; color: white; padding: 2px; text-align: center;">Create Your Own Dilemma</p> <div style="text-align: center; font-size: 48px; font-weight: bold;">?</div>
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Dilemma Card Examples

In an effort to receive a GFRP token, a reward for “winning” the round, each participant takes turns pitching and promoting their solution to the judge. The judge then assesses each solution with the following three criterion in mind:

- **Feasible:** Is the plan feasible?
- **Desirable:** Is it something family members in the community want?
- **Viable:** Is it likely to be successful?



GFRP Tokens

Signifying the end of the round, the judge selects a winner and passes the judging responsibility to the player next to them. Regardless of who “wins,” players are likely to pick up some ideas they can take back to their own programs, as well as to engage in fruitful conversation with other practitioners. When played with families, the Family Engagement Game also has the capacity for guiding co-creation of ideas and programming, by empowering family voices and centering the perspectives of families within solutions to the dilemmas.

Improving the Game Through Iterations and Piloting

We launched a prototype of the Family Engagement Game for Change during a presentation with [staff at the Toronto Public Library](#) in January 2019. We then [shared](#) about the Toronto session online, soliciting interest from organizations—schools, nonprofits, and anyone who works with families—to pilot the game. To date, over 270 different organizations have shown interest and provided rationale for why, how, and when they wanted to test the game. A diversity of organizations, including school districts, public libraries, churches, departments of education, family engagement offices, and even teacher certification programs at the college level were interested in piloting the game.

Given this interest, we have improved the game's appearance, dilemma cards, and gameplay process. One specific improvement included the addition of a "Wildcard" strategy, which allows a player to pitch their choice of 5R strategies. We also added the "write your own dilemma" cards, which allows players to customize the game for different contexts or imagine new problems that need solutions. Finally, we redesigned the game pieces to be colorful and engaging, a choice that created a more appealing experience for players.

After making these updates to the game, we provided materials to organizations who in turn, promised to provide feedback from their experiences. So far, we know that over 15 organizations have formally piloted or plan to pilot the game. Here's what they've shared:

- "[The game] was a good discussion starter. It really got the group I played with creatively thinking about solutions to a problem that is very real without the stress of being in the moment." – **Children's librarian**
- "As the director of the center, I really like it! I am hoping to adapt it for our preschool teachers during our professional days later this year." – **Director of a childcare center**
- "The Family Engagement Game helped me cover many areas that we can target in order to help the families we serve to engage in our activities and meetings, etc." – **Family engagement coordinator**
- "We always try to promote family engagement and leadership in our school, so this game is a great tool to help our PTA parents stay connected, develop further parental skills and train other parents." – **School principal**
- "We played the game on Zoom and the students unanimously chose to play it collaboratively. I changed a couple of the scenarios to make them "fit" our course objectives. I would absolutely include it next time I teach the course." – **Professor, masters-level SEL course**

When assessing how players' perspectives change after playing the game, we found that a majority of the players felt the exposure to different methods of family engagement, as well as the pitch-style manner of hearing diverse ideas and perspectives from fellow gameplayers, helped them to become more creative with solutions as the game went on. Specifically, one participant said,

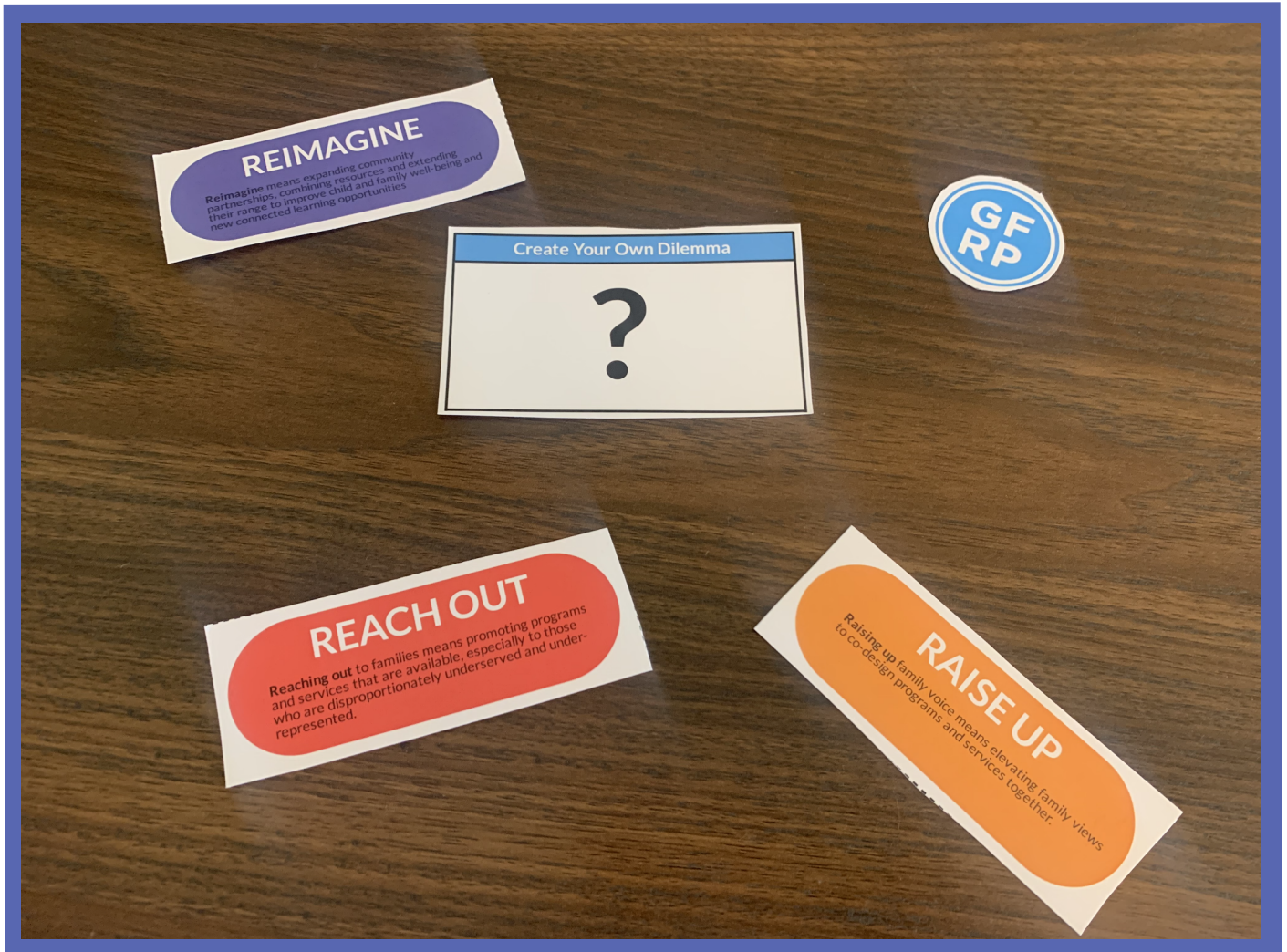
"This experience reinforced that there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all model."

– **Family Engagement Game player**

In addition to overwhelmingly positive feedback, we also received requests for tailoring dilemma cards for specific contexts, and some organizations asked to translate the game to Spanish so that they could play it with bilingual families! Additional interest from higher education courses and accreditation programs in regard to including the game as an icebreaker activity, classroom exercise, or meeting tool demonstrates the versatility of the game and its potential for far-reaching applications.

Key Learnings and Future Directions

Utilizing a discussion-based game to bridge the divide between theory and practice and family engagement was both challenging and rewarding. Our team found that innovative strategies that connect practitioners and promote cross-disciplinary thinking are essential for creating memorable professional development opportunities. In future iterations of the Family Engagement Game, we hope to build on what we have learned from piloting and expand the game's reach to even more contexts, including those that involve multiple stakeholders, including families. In the end, the Family Engagement game is a prime example of how “playing with problems” can help practitioners not only to source collaborative solutions, but to think and learn together within a shared goal of family engagement. 🔄



Family Engagement Game

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